

SPIRIT, SELF-IDENTITY, AND COMMUNICATION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MULTIPLE FORMS OF
EDUCATION IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

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by
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Abstract

Spirit, Self-identity, and Communication: Implications for the Multiple

Forms of Education in Christian Communities of Faith

by

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The “self-identity” of Christians – who they understand themselves to be – has always been a critical aspect of Christian faith. Believers have always faced conflicts between the demands of their faith and the culture(s) in which they live. This dissertation explores self-identity in relation to sociological and technological changes in late modern societies such as the United States, the dynamics of human communication, and a realistic theology of the Spirit of God, and considers the implications for practical theology, with particular emphasis on Christian education.

It is the threefold thesis of this dissertation (1) that the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming our lives, faith communities, and the world is supported or diminished by our human responses, (2) that a person’s response to the Spirit is strongly influenced by the person’s self-identity, which is a continually emerging reality, a life-long process that occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of verbal and nonverbal, intentional and unintentional, communication events, and (3) that critical reflection on self-identity, the conflicting forces of late modernity, and the dynamics of human communication points to the need for an integrated, multifaceted approach to Christian education that takes into account the theological significance of the informal and unintentional processes of education that occur within a community of faith as well as the

myriad forms of intentional education.

The theological analysis in the dissertation emerges from the constructive postmodern theology of John Cobb, who challenges the presuppositions of the late modern worldview and affirms the immanence of the transcendent God as an ontological reality that sustains the world and makes it possible for us to escape biological, psychological, and historical determinism. With this theological perspective in view, communication research and theory that illumine how communication generates and influences self-identity are discussed. The implications for practical theology are explored in relation to Christian education conceived of as the multiplicity of intentional and unintentional ways in which all aspects of church life educate.

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Introduction

Although the term is a contemporary one, the “self-identity” of believers has always been a critical aspect of Christian faith. If we are committed to living a Christian life, we will inevitably face conflicts between how we would like to think, feel, and act as Christians and ways we are encouraged to think, feel, and act by the culture in which we live. In approaching the issue of self-identity from the perspective of practical theology, I am interested in the dialogic relationship between human experiences that affect our self-identity, including, but not limited to, intentional Christian practices, and abstract theological understandings of who we are. The dialogical relationship between theory and praxis is inevitable, even if it is unacknowledged.¹ By intentionally focusing on the relationship while exploring the dynamics of Christian self-identity, we can increase our critical insight and wisdom in relationship to our theology and our practice.

Through the centuries, the challenges to Christian self-identity have varied within different cultures and in different historical periods, but they have never been absent. The focus of this dissertation is on issues of Christian self-identity in the late modern society of the United States today. I am particularly concerned with the influence of sociological and technological changes in the United States on self-identity, and the implications of these changes for practical theology, with particular emphasis on Christian education. Only with an understanding of the context within which we find ourselves can we reflect

¹ In thinking through the relationship between theory and praxis, I find Hans-Georg Gadamer’s critical appropriation of Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* helpful. Gadamer argues that the three moments of the hermeneutical process, understanding, interpretation, and application, are interrelated. See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 312-24.

critically on ways to encourage and nurture vital, mature, faithful Christian self-identities in a late modern society.

Although adherents of all religious traditions in the United States face challenges to their self-identity, the specific kinds of challenges they face and the resources for response available within each tradition vary. I was raised within the Presbyterian Church. My early years in the church, especially during the ministry of Dr. Francis H. Hayward, were extremely positive and formative. In college, however, I found the philosophical challenges to Christianity and to my own Christian self-identity compelling.

During these years, my debate coach Dale Stockton, who was also pastor of a small Methodist church, became a spiritual mentor for me. He helped me process what I was learning in philosophy and psychology while helping me to maintain my faith. After his brutal murder the year after my college graduation, I lost my faith. It was almost a decade before I consciously embarked on a circuitous journey of returning to faith and the church.

My personal history forced me to face directly the challenges to Christian self-identity, which is the focus of this project. In the process, my faith has been deepened and strengthened by learning from the ways adherents of other religious traditions understand God and nurture faith and self-identity. It is, therefore, my hope that aspects of this analysis will be useful not only to Christians but to adherents of other religious traditions as well.

What does it mean to have a Christian self-identity? If people have a personal or corporate identity that is Christian, “it is because of their incorporation into the internal

history told and celebrated in the Christian church.”² Because this history is told in many different ways by people of deep faith, there is no one “Christian self-identity” that stands as the norm in terms of which other forms of Christian self-identity can be evaluated as more or less faithful. In explaining to one another why we interpret Christianity as we do, we may come to have deep respect for alternative Christian visions while still finding the interpretation that has emerged out of our own community of faith to be the most compelling.

Seen in a positive light, the multiplicity of Christian understandings that are lived out by faithful people all over the world reminds us that no person or group has a complete and accurate understanding of what it means to be a Christian. To use Paul’s imagery, we all see “through a glass darkly.” Many of the appalling events of Christian history occurred because some group of Christians became convinced that they were the “true” Christians and those who did not accept the faith or understand it in a particular way were punished, if not killed.

Although we associate Christian identity with the church, it can and does occur outside the church. This has become increasingly possible since Christianity became established under Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Prior to that time, Christians were often persecuted; thus, the decision to affirm a Christian identity often required great courage and hardship. Constantine was able to consolidate his power and establish a “new Rome” in Constantinople. When he decided to declare himself a Christian, he was in a position to stop Christian persecution, thus initiating what has

² Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr., Christian Identity and Theological Education (Chico,

become known as the Constantinian Era, during which Christianity enjoyed the support of the state.

Because of the position of the church relative to the state, it became politically and economically advantageous for people to claim a Christian identity. In some situations, when the head of the family joined the church, the rest of the family became Christians automatically. As a result, some of those joining the church did so for political or sociological reasons that did not lead necessarily to an understanding of, or a commitment to, Jesus Christ. In such a context, claiming a Christian self-identity may have little to do with interest in or effort toward living a Christian life. Such political and social factors continue to be the primary reason some people join the church in the United States today. As a result, it is possible to find people outside the church who demonstrate far more influence of Jesus Christ in their lives than some of the people who are inside the church.³

Although one claims a Christian self-identity as a result of some degree of identification with Christian history as one's own history, this does not, in and of itself, speak to the vitality and centrality of Christ in one's life. Theologian John Cobb emphasizes this point in his analysis of the serious challenges currently facing oldline churches. Echoing the testimony against the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3: 14-18), Cobb argues that one of the most damaging characteristics of oldline denominations today is lukewarmness. "We are lukewarm because we do not have an understanding of Christian

Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 26.

³ Hough and Cobb, 23.

faith as supremely important either for ourselves or for the world.”⁴ Despite the fact that there are individual members of oldline denominations who have such an understanding, “no such understanding is widely operative in our collective work as congregations or denominations.”⁵ A lukewarm faith cannot compete with the intensity and variety of influences in our society that are vying for our attention and competing with Christianity to define our self-identity.

It is the threefold thesis of this dissertation (1) that the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming our lives, faith communities, and world is supported or diminished by our human responses, (2) that a person’s response to the Spirit is strongly influenced by the person’s self-identity, which is a continually emerging reality, a life-long process that occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of verbal and nonverbal, intentional and unintentional, communication events, and (3) that from the perspective of a theology that affirms the immanence of the Spirit of God, critical reflection on self-identity, the conflicting forces of late modernity, and the dynamics of human communication points to the need for an integrated, multifaceted approach to Christian education that takes into account the theological significance of the informal and unintentional processes of education that occur within a community of faith as well as the myriad forms of intentional education.

In the first chapter, I look at the importance of self-identity in influencing the way we live. The thesis of this chapter is that our human actions, including our human

⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., Reclaiming the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 8.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

responses to the work of the Spirit, are influenced significantly by our self-identity. The sociological dynamics in the late modern, highly mobile society of the United States, which is permeated by high technology, mass media, and transnational telecommunications networks, influence the lifelong process of emerging self-identity. In late modern societies, space and time no longer function as limiting boundaries on the diversity of people, beliefs, values, images, and styles of life to which people are exposed and which have the potential to influence their self-identity. It is critical, therefore, that practical theologians take into account the processes that influence self-identity in order that we might better understand ways to nurture and sustain strong, mature, Christian self-identities that will allow us to cooperate more fully with the work of the Spirit in our own lives and in the world.

There is, however, a significant complication that must be taken into account. Cobb points out that one of the causes for lukewarmness in the church is the fact that at many points in our history, faithfulness to Christian beliefs and strong Christian self-identities have led Christians to contribute to atrocities. Anti-Judaic rhetoric developed from biblical texts and preached by people who understood themselves to be faithful Christians have contributed to pogroms and to the Holocaust.⁶ Anti-Judaic rhetoric continues among some Christians today. Faced with such realities, many Christians are lukewarm because they lack the theological knowledge they need to affirm a strong Christian self-identity and simultaneously reject theologies that contain anti-Judaistic

⁶ See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism (New York: Seabury, 1974), and Clark M. Williamson, Has God Rejected His People?: Anti-Judaism in the Christian Church (Nashville: Abingdon), 1982.

elements. Such theologies exist. Cobb himself has made important contributions to the development of such a theology. The problem, as Cobb sees it, is that lay people and even many clergy in local congregations are unaware of such theological arguments, so they are hesitant to claim their Christian self-identity with strength and confidence. To be adequate, any approach to strengthen Christian self-identity must deal directly with such theological realities.

In the second chapter, I relate the concept of self-identity to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. My thesis is that the immanence of the transcendent God is a vital reality that sustains the world and makes it possible for us to escape biological, psychological, and historical determinism, and that although the Spirit is working in our lives whether we are aware of it or not, our self-identities will be changed in fundamental ways if we become aware of this reality and seek to cooperate actively with the work of the Spirit in our lives.

It is the immanent Spirit of God that feeds the vitality of our faith and sustains love and hope in the face of massive evil. Human beings cannot bring about the commonwealth of God on earth through our own efforts. History has proven, however, that human action is quite capable of bringing about a living hell on earth for people, creatures, and the earth itself. The late modern worldview allows no possibility for divinity, particularly divinity that might actually be involved in the reality of our daily existence. In arguing for the thesis of this chapter, I reject the adequacy of this worldview and offer an alternative – a constructive postmodern worldview – that is philosophically intelligible, scientifically defensible, and congenial to Christian faith.

The theologian I find most helpful in addressing the realities of late modernity is John Cobb. Cobb directly challenges the validity of the presuppositions of the late modern worldview, thus clearing the way to argue for the ontological reality of the Spirit of God. Giving serious attention to the presuppositions that undergird our view of the world represents far more than just a philosophical quibble. As a result of over three centuries of historical critical analysis of biblical texts and philosophical challenges to the possibility of divinity, many Christians, including many Christian clergy, wonder if there is actually any sense in which what they claim to believe could actually be true. Some Christians are able simply to ignore what history, science, and philosophy tell us about the world in which we live, affirming belief in God without trying to relate their faith to the rest of what they believe to be true about the world. However, many Christians find themselves with “faith seeking understanding” or, in Hannah Arendt’s evocative translation of Anselm’s famous quotation, “faith asking the intellect for help,”⁷ and the help they seek demands confronting knowledge of the real world in which we live.

Young Christians who attend universities and begin learning about the world as seen through the eyes of diverse disciplines are likely to have an experience not unlike that of John Cobb. Cobb was born to missionary parents in Japan. He considered himself a devout Christian throughout his early years. While serving in World War II, he worked with a unit studying Japanese for intelligence work. There he met a number of Roman Catholic and Jewish intellectuals, many from New York. He learned for the first time that his “southern Methodist piety was only one, quite peculiar, form of religious

⁷ Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 2: 113.

life, and that indeed Christian faith in general was a highly questionable matter from many points of view.”⁸ After the war, with many new questions in his mind, he began graduate work at the University of Chicago. There he experienced a religious and existential crisis. He found himself immersed in a world of ideas unlike anything he had ever known before. As he describes it, it was “an experience of not fitting. The God whom I had grown up believing in just did not fit in with the world as I came to understand it. The whole thing fell apart for me.”⁹

Eventually he was introduced to the thought of Alfred North Whitehead through his teacher Charles Hartshorne. Whitehead gave Cobb a way to engage the modern intellectual and cultural milieu and go beyond it in overcoming its nontheistic and atheistic tendencies. Unfortunately, many university students today find themselves with a childhood faith that no longer makes any sense to them, but without ever finding a door through which they can walk back into the church and a life of vibrant faith.

The tremendous amount of information we now have about the Bible is enough in itself to challenge the faith of many Christians. Educated clergy and laity are aware of the varied genres of literature found in the Bible, including myths and sagas that cannot be regarded as historical fact, the different historical periods in which biblical texts were written, influences of other middle eastern religions and cultures on the writers, redaction processes that were shaped by the social, historical location of the redactors, and various conflicts that influenced the final choices reflected in the biblical canon as we now have

⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., Can Christ Become Good News Again? (St. Louis: Chalice, 1991), 8.

⁹ Ibid., 22.

it. Such information, along with the reality of evil, including the evil perpetrated by Christians of the past and present against non-Christians and Christians alike, combined with the modern worldview's denial of the possibility of divinity lead many thoughtful people to wonder if the biblical narratives that tell of God's love and active concern for every human being are finally just beautiful poetry and wishful thinking.

It may be true, as many claim, that it is not possible either to prove or disprove the existence of God. However, the assumptions we hold to be true about the world in which we live can be either congenial to Christian faith, or flatly contradict it. It is important for us to think carefully about what we believe to be true about the nature of reality because those beliefs almost always influence the vitality of our Christian faith and self-identity.

Because we necessarily live in this world, our assumptions about the world and our relationship to it are not irrelevant. Many scientists and philosophers espouse a worldview that reduces reality to its material aspects and denies the possibility of the sacred. Because there are scientifically and philosophically viable alternatives to this worldview, it is important that religious educators and clergy be familiar with them. Human theories and theologies are always partial, containing both truth and error. However, if there are sound scientific and philosophical perspectives that are more congenial to belief in the reality of God, knowledge of such perspectives may encourage Christians to take their faith more seriously and move out of the current of negativity and cynicism that is so prevalent in late modern societies today.

I rely primarily on John Cobb's theology to present a constructive postmodern alternative; however, I also find the work of Jürgen Moltmann and Michael Welker

helpful. Although their theological methods differ from Cobb's, their theological understandings are very close to Cobb's on most issues. Moltmann and Welker both point to the importance of recognizing the philosophical and metaphysical assumptions implicit in theology, even though they do not develop their analysis to the extent that Cobb does.

In God in Creation, Moltmann argues that we must move beyond both the Cartesian metaphysics of "subject" and the Aristotelian metaphysics of substance. "Both can only be done away with by means of a relational metaphysics, based on the mutual relativity of human beings and the world."¹⁰ In his footnote he cites two books by Cobb that offer the kind of relational metaphysics Moltmann believes we need.¹¹ Moltmann shares with Cobb the conviction that we need a "new kind of thinking about God. The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The centre is the recognition of the presence of God *in* [original emphasis] the world, and presence of the world *in* [original emphasis] God."¹²

In addition to many aspects of theological compatibility, Moltmann and Cobb both share a passionate commitment to the world church and to the laity. Cobb, in particular, has written many books and articles as an academic theologian; however, he has also written several books that are not only accessible to, but intended for, clergy and

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation, trans. Margaret Kohl (1985; reprint Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 50. see Bib.

¹¹ In his footnote Moltmann writes, "This applies particularly to 'the theology of nature' which is developed from A. N. Whitehead's process thinking." Moltmann then cites books by Cobb, both of which have been translated into German: God and the World (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969); Is it Too Late? A Theology of Creation (Beverly Hills: Bruce Publishing Co., 1972).

¹² Moltmann, God in Creation, 13. see Bib.

laity who are not able to engage the highly technical and complex arguments of academic theology.¹³

In addition to the writings of Cobb and Moltmann, I also find Michael Welker's work on the Holy Spirit particularly relevant to the concerns of this dissertation. In God the Spirit, Welker develops what he calls a "realistic theology of the Spirit," which relies explicitly on Whitehead's metaphysics, although he does not, unlike Cobb, articulate the details of Whitehead's ontology.¹⁴ In terms of this dissertation, Welker's emphasis on the ontological reality of the immanence of the Spirit, his analysis of pluralism, and his development of criteria for guiding discernment of the work of the Spirit are particularly helpful. Welker and Moltmann by being deeply involved with biblical texts in developing their theologies offer an important dimension that is not emphasized explicitly in Cobb's philosophical theology.

In the third chapter of the dissertation, I argue that to bring about greater degrees of justice, love, mercy, and righteousness in the world, we must recognize the significance of human communication in creating and sustaining--or in destroying--loving, merciful, just, and righteous communities, whether they be political, educational, social, or religious communities.

A particularly fruitful way of conceptualizing the wide range of communication events that impinge on us daily is the perspective of the narrative paradigm as developed

¹³ Cobb has written many books over the years for laypersons. The ones that are most relevant to this dissertation are Becoming a Thinking Christian (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Lay Theology (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1994); Reclaiming the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Praying for Jennifer (Nashville: Upper Room, 1985); and Doubting Thomas: Christology in Story Form (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

¹⁴ Michael Welker, God the Spirit (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

by rhetorician Walter R. Fisher.¹⁵ Fisher emphasizes the natural human impulse to respond to messages we hear, and the stories they entail, in terms of the question of narrative coherence, whether or not the story “hangs together,” and the question of narrative fidelity, whether or not the story “rings true.” The narrative paradigm builds on the approach to rhetoric taken by Kenneth Burke, whom many identify as the most important rhetorician of this century.

Because communication – formal and informal, intentional and unintentional, verbal and nonverbal – generates our self-identity and influences it throughout our lives, Christian leaders need to understand the dynamics of communication. In Chapter 3, I look specifically at the narrative paradigm, including its emphasis on the process of identification as the means through which we influence one another intentionally and unintentionally, and at critical principles of human communication in light of the narrative paradigm.

In Chapter 4, I argue that critical reflection on self-identity, conflicting forces of late modern society, and communication dynamics in communities of faith, when viewed from the perspective of Cobb’s Christian vision of a Spirit-filled reality, points to the need for an integrated, multifaceted approach to Christian education that takes into account the informal and unintentional processes of education that occur within a community of faith as well as the myriad forms of intentional education.

The work of Christian educator Maria Harris is particularly helpful for thinking about the multiplicity of ways the church educates. She believes Christian education

¹⁵ Walter R. Fisher, Human Communication as Narration (Columbia: University of South Carolina

includes “the entire course of the church’s life.”¹⁶ Harris identifies five categories of curriculum: *kerygma*, proclaiming the good news of the gospel; *didache*, the formal practice of teaching; *leiturgia*, corporate worship and prayer life; *koinonia*, the life of people in community; and *diakonia*, the ministry of service within the community and to the world, to which I add a sixth category – *economia*, church administration. In analyzing the ways in which education occurs through *kerygma*, *didache*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *economia*, I incorporate educator Elliot Eisner’s concepts of the explicit, the implicit, and the null curricula.¹⁷

Although specific aspects of this approach appear in the Christian education literature, we do not yet have a theology of Christian education that lifts up the ontological relationality of existence and reflects critically on the implications of the inherent relationality that therefore exists among education, worship, pastoral care, church administration, prayer groups, potlucks, and all the other formal and informal events that constitute the life of a local congregation, and the inherent relationality that exists between a community of faith and the culture(s) in which it is embedded.

In order to understand more fully the theology that is communicated intentionally and unintentionally by a local congregation, the interrelatedness of worship, intentional Christian educational events, and other intentional and unintentional communication events in the life of the church need to be taken into account. To address these issues,

Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 17.

¹⁷ Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1994), 87-107.

pastors, Christian educators, and other church leaders need to work together to think theologically about all the aspects of church life and the relationship of the church to the larger world community.

The lack of theological thinking in local congregations is one of the most serious problems in oldline denominations. Failure to think seriously about our faith and the reasons for our convictions and beliefs contributes to the lukewarmness that permeates so many congregations. I argue that we need to identify ways that theological thinking can be incorporated into the explicit and the implicit curricula of not only *didache*, but also *leiturgia*, *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *economia*.

Considering education in these terms in light of the issues of self-identity, communication, and the immanence of the Spirit of God discussed in earlier chapters illumines issues that must be addressed if we are to understand what is being taught by a given community of faith. All the forms of church life educate, and each form relies on verbal and nonverbal communication for its embodiment. Thus in the concrete reality of each local congregation, the details of intentional and unintentional communication – in all the varied verbal and nonverbal forms it can take – are significant *theologically*. In the inextricable blending of content and form, the one who generates the message, the content of the message, the medium through which it is communicated, the one who perceives the message, and the context in which it occurs are all part of a whole. The communicational significance of any one aspect of the whole cannot be understood if it is considered in isolation from the other aspects.

In the final section of Chapter 4, I offer church leaders suggestions for gaining insight into the multiplicity of ways their local church is educating those who come within its sphere of influence. The issues raised in this dissertation are offered as tools that can be used to examine the theological nature and health of the air, water, and food that a community of faith is living on and generating in the day-to-day reality of its life.

CHAPTER 1

Self-identity in Late Modern Society

Our self-identity is the private autobiographical narrative we construct to explain to ourselves who we are and why we act the way we do. Throughout our lives we interact with others who intentionally and unintentionally communicate to us their feelings and thoughts about who we are, who they are, and what life is about. We may misinterpret some interactions and be quite accurate in other cases. Nevertheless, as a result of our experiences with others and our awareness of fictional and non-fictional characters through mass media, we learn a great deal about the world, the diverse ways people live, what they believe, and how they behave. These ongoing experiences inform us, creating impressions and feelings that influence our self-identity and our construction of social reality. Our self-identity embraces our understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and who we believe we are in relationship to all of creation, not only other people, but the earth and other creatures as well.

Our self-identity is important because it influences significantly what we expect of life, how we treat ourselves and how we treat others and the world. As I explain in this chapter, the social construction of reality plays a significant role in our self-identity. However, theologians such as John B. Cobb, Jr., argue that it is scientifically intelligible and philosophically defensible to believe that there is more to who we are and to our self-identity than can be explained by the process of social construction, psychology, or biology. Cobb believes that the Spirit of the transcendent God is immanent in the world, sustaining our existence and drawing us toward the life God would have us live. He

argues that there are good reasons to accept this as a realistic truth claim, not just a poetic statement. I find his argument convincing.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our own lives is vital to our self-identity. However, before exploring the possibilities and implications of a realistic theology of the Holy Spirit, we need an understanding of the context in which we find ourselves. The ethnic, ecclesial, academic, corporate, political, social, media cultures in which we are embedded, through a combination of choice and accident of birth, have a powerful influence on our self-identity. These cultures are permeated by a panoply of sounds and images that seek to attract and pattern our attention and energy in ways that influence the content, tone, strength and texture of our self-identity.

Religious people have always had to contend with myriad influences promoting enticing values and ways of life that conflict with those that spring from religious faith. In every society at a given point in time there are particular challenges to face. In order to deal with issues of Christian self-identity in the United States today, practical theologians need to consider the ways in which sociological and technological changes are influencing the process of developing a self-identity in their own time. Only with an understanding of the context within which we find ourselves can we reflect critically on ways to encourage and nurture vital, mature, faithful Christian self-identities in a late modern society.

One of the assumptions behind this first chapter, which will be addressed directly in Chapter 2, is the belief that the work of the Holy Spirit in sustaining and transforming

our lives, faith communities, and world is supported or diminished by human responses. The thesis of this chapter is that our human responses to the work of the Spirit are influenced significantly by our self-identity. Because of the sociological and technological changes that have occurred in late modern societies such as the United States in the past few decades, the factors influencing self-identity have become far more complex. Therefore, it is critical that practical theologians take into account the processes that influence self-identity in order that we might better understand ways to nurture and sustain strong, mature, faithful self-identities rooted in the God of Jesus Christ.

People of all religious ways face significant challenges in trying to live a faithful life within their religious tradition. Although some of the challenges are similar, there are also differences because of the different histories and beliefs involved. The resources for responding to the challenges also differ within each religious way. I am addressing these issues only in terms of Christian faith and self-identity, although it is my hope that at least some aspects of this analysis will be useful to adherents of other religious ways as well.

The most persuasive evidence for supporting the claim that a self-identity rooted in God is critical for living a Christian life may well be the experiences of those whose Christian self-identities have allowed them to express their faith despite toxic, violent forces in their environment. Therefore, before addressing the more abstract aspects of late modernity and self-identity, I want to begin by reflecting on the life of a person whose Christian self-identity strengthened her immeasurably and helped her to contribute significantly to the lives of millions of people in this country—a possibility no one would

have predicted given the oppressive conditions in which she was born and raised. That person is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer.

Fannie Lou Hamer: A Life of Faith and Courage

→ Center (1st level heading)

On June 9, 1963, Mrs. Hamer was traveling to her home in Ruleville, Mississippi with five others after attending a citizenship school in South Carolina. The Continental Trailways bus stopped near the end of the long trip at a bus station in Winona, Mississippi. Although the Interstate Commerce Commission had outlawed segregation in transportation facilities, many small towns in the South refused to follow the law. When Mrs. Hamer and the others sat down at the counter to order, several Winona policemen and highway patrol officers entered the station and made them leave. When one of the women started writing down the license number of a patrol car, the officers began arresting all of them.¹

That night Mrs. Hamer, a forty-four-year-old woman with a disfigured left leg from a childhood bout with polio, was savagely beaten in the jail along with the other two women in the group. She had no secret information the police sought to gain from her. She had done nothing illegal. Mrs. Hamer was cursed, degraded, humiliated, and beaten until her body turned hard. Her crime was the color of her skin. The African-American woman who wrote down the license plate of the police car, Annelle Ponder, and a fifteen year-old teenager, June Johnson, who had also attended the voter registration workshop,

¹ A thoughtful, detailed analysis of Mrs. Hamer's civil rights' work and Christian faith is found in Charles Marsh, God's Long Summer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10-48. The details of her life are taken from his report.

were beaten severely as well. The sheriff chose the teenager for his personal target, hitting her in the face and stomach, tearing her clothes and joining the others to stomp on her when she fell to the ground. From the stories told by those present, Mrs. Hamer's beating might have ended in her death except for the intervention of an unidentified white man. After he told the others, "That's enough," no one else was beaten that night. Later Mrs. Hamer heard the police officers sitting in the other room plotting how they could kill her and hide her body so no one would ever know.²

Although death and despair hung heavy in the cells of the Winona, Mississippi jail that night, the next day Mrs. Hamer's irrepressible spirit rose again, and she started to sing. Gospel songs filled the jail as the others who had been incarcerated joined her. The music fed their souls, transformed their despair and empowered "them to stay on 'the Gospel train' until it reaches the Kingdom."³

Mrs. Hamer's self-identity was deeply rooted in Christian faith. The faith at the center of her self-identity was not shaken despite what whites said about her and did to her. After she was brutally beaten in the jail in Winona, she emerged with a perspective generated by that faith. "She said astonishingly, 'It wouldn't solve any problem for me to

² Marsh, 21.

³ Cited in Marsh, 22.

hate whites just because they hate me. Oh, there's so much hate, only God has kept the Negro sane.”⁴

The paradox of white Christians hating and mistreating blacks led her to challenge whites to think about their faith. As she was being escorted to her trial by the jailer who had been involved in her severe beating, she asked him, “Do you people ever think or wonder how you'll feel when the time comes you'll have to meet God?” His response was full of embarrassment and vigorous denial. ‘Who you talking about?’ he mumbled. In fact, Mrs. Hamer knew all too well what had happened. ‘I hit them with the truth, and it hurts them,’ she said.”⁵

It was at Williams Chapel Church in Ruleville in August 1962 that Mrs. Hamer first heard about her civil rights and the voter registration drive. The longing for justice deep within her was stirred. She knew immediately that “her life would be very different from this point on.”⁶ The next day a busload of African Americans arrived at the courthouse to register to vote, as was their right. They sat in the bus frightened by the hostility they knew their actions would evoke. Finally it was Mrs. Hamer who was the first one off the bus. Unable to complete a lengthy written analysis of part of the state constitution to the satisfaction of the clerk, Mrs. Hamer returned to the bus several hours later exhausted.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

On the trip home the bus was pulled over by police. The bus driver was arrested for driving a bus that might be mistaken for a school bus. Those left sitting on the bus were frightened, wondering what might happen next. Tapping into the deep well of faith within her, Mrs. Hamer began to sing. Her strong, deep voice encouraged everyone. Their voices lifted in prayer and praise to God; their hearts took courage. Eventually the bus driver was fined \$100 for driving a bus that was “too yellow,” as the citation read. They could only come up with \$30. The officers agreed to lower the fine and take what they had.

The tired travelers finally arrived home. Within a few minutes, Mrs. Hamer's employer was standing at her door. He had already heard about her efforts that day. Unless she withdrew her application to register to vote the following morning, she would no longer have a job, despite having worked on the man's plantation, mostly as a sharecropper, for 18 years. She left the plantation in the middle of the night and moved from one place to another in order to avoid violence from the Ku Klux Klan. After moving from the home of one friend, the bedroom in which she had been sleeping was riddled with bullets during the night. Her fears were not exaggerated.

Bob Moses, a Harvard-educated philosophy student who had initiated the first Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) projects in Mississippi, heard about Mrs. Hamer from Charles McLaurin, who had told him about Mrs. Hamer's courage when they went to the courthouse in Indianola to register to vote. Moses told

McLaurin to find the “lady who sings the hymns.”⁷ He wanted Mrs. Hamer to attend the SNCC annual conference in Nashville.

Again and again Mrs. Hamer’s deep faith provided wisdom and leadership that tapped into and contributed to the theological depth of the civil rights movement. At mass meetings her leadership was dynamic and influential.

Mrs. Hamer helped create a great reservoir of energy for all her brothers and sisters in the movement; experiences of sheer joy, as well as the dark nights of the soul when glad emotions were spent, were sustained by the spiritual energy radiating outward. There was, thus, much more to the resiliency they [the mass meetings] imparted than psychological empowerment. Lamentably, some historians have trivialized the meetings’ complex theological character, describing it in terms resembling Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers—groups that try to change the behavior of their members ‘by offering a supportive social environment.’ It ought not to slight the important work of twelve-step groups to insist that Mrs. Hamer’s utterly serious devotion to Jesus not be regarded solely as a motivational tool.⁸

In discussions of whether to accept whites into SNCC, Mrs. Hamer stood firmly on the side of integration. She argued, “If we’re trying to break down the barrier of segregation, we can’t segregate ourselves.”⁹ Although the issue continued to create controversy, SNCC did encourage the participation of white students in the Summer Project, a highly visible interracial project designed to bring hundreds of white college students from campuses all over the country to learn about life in Mississippi and demonstrate that interracial cooperation was possible.

In the summer of 1964 seven hundred college students gathered in Oxford, Ohio, for a training session before heading south. Although few knew who Mrs. Hamer was

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Footnote here

initially, she soon became a palpable presence, pulling together their disparate energies into a focused sense of purpose and commitment.

Mrs. Hamer bore witness to her faith in a way that both inspired and disarmed the students, many of whom had long grown suspicious of the religious traditions of their parents. With a pastoral gentleness, she explained the harsh realities for black people in Mississippi. She cautioned against sarcasm and cynicism. She admonished love and nonviolence as the only adequate response to white oppression. She insisted that the volunteers not stereotype Mississippi whites: they should look deeper and try to discern the good that is in them.¹⁰

The Summer Project caught the attention of the whole country. Life in Mississippi was finally exposed to a national audience.

Mrs. Hamer's inspiring example illumines the crucial role self-identity plays in a life of faith. Where does such a self-identity come from when one is born and raised in a hostile society that denies one's very humanity? How is it sustained? In the case of Mrs. Hamer, her self-identity emerged in relationship to a mother whom she says taught her children to "respect themselves." It was further defined, strengthened and sustained by the passionate faith of the black church. Despite the demeaning treatment blacks received six days a week, there was a time on Sunday morning when their worth, dignity, and humanity were joyously and persuasively affirmed as they worshipped the God in whose image they were formed. People like Mrs. Hamer knew that their self-identity was one of the few things in life that whites could not control, despite the daily reality of white oppression and degradation.¹¹

←⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

¹¹ Ibid., 13. On the importance of the black church see also James Cone, My Soul Looks Back (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

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The depth and strength of Mrs. Hamer's faith are a source of inspiration, encouragement, and guidance for all who seek to deepen their faith and self-identity as Christians. Because of who she knew herself to be, Mrs. Hamer had an inner strength that allowed her to stand her ground without being intimidated by the most powerful politicians in the United States.¹² Mrs. Hamer's life illustrates a central aspect of the thesis of this project: the nature of our self-identity is critically important if our Christian faith is to generate and sustain a Christian life. With Mrs. Hamer's life in mind, I turn now to an analysis of the nature of a late modern society and the concept of self-identity to highlight issues that are particularly relevant for practical theologians to consider.

An Overview of the Chapter → *Center*

The thesis of this chapter is that our human responses to the work of the Spirit are influenced significantly by our self-identity. Because of the sociological and technological changes that have occurred in late modern societies such as the United States in the past few decades, the factors influencing self-identity have become far more complex. Therefore, it is critical that practical theologians take into account the processes

¹² Mrs. Hamer went to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 as a member of the alternative Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation. During the Credentials Committee hearings on their challenge of the all-white delegation, Mrs. Hamer gave an impassioned speech that was covered live on the networks. President Lyndon Johnson was angry, fearing she would damage his nomination. He immediately called an unscheduled press conference, interrupting regular coverage on the networks, and getting Mrs. Hamer off the air. The networks later realized what he had done and rebroadcast her speech in its entirety. Johnson's lieutenants were sent out to stop the challenge and work out a compromise. When Hubert Humphrey offered the delegation two seats, Mrs. Hamer was unimpressed. Though some black leaders supported the compromise, Mrs. Hamer and the poorer members of the party, the women, the sharecroppers, and the day workers, refused to accept a political handout. In the end the Freedom Democrats rejected the compromise.

Mrs. Hamer had the ability and courage to confront people with great power, wealth, and experience, despite her own background. She did not owe anyone anything, and she would not compromise her position for a political gain that did not take the wisdom, voices, and rights of the poor seriously.

that influence self-identity in order that we might better understand ways to nurture and sustain vital, mature, and strong self-identities rooted in the God of Jesus Christ.

This analysis has three interrelated parts. The first part deals briefly with the theme of transcending the modern world into a postmodern reality, a theme that influences if not dominates the discourse in many academic disciplines, especially in the United States. The term “postmodern” is used in a range of conflicting ways. Despite the confusion surrounding the term, it is my contention that practical theologians need to be aware of the major themes associated with postmodernism because of the significant implications they have for theology and religious faith. It is particularly important that practical theologians become familiar with the *constructive* postmodern alternatives that directly challenge the severe relativism and nihilism of the most extreme deconstructive postmodernists.

In the second part of the analysis, I define self-identity and discuss three critical attributes of the concept: its reflexiveness, impermanence, and narrativity. It is my contention that these characteristics of self-identity must be taken into account when we grapple with the challenges of what is involved in nurturing and sustaining a mature, faithful Christian self-identity.

In the third part of this analysis, I introduce three significant sociological and technological changes that influence the processes of developing, sustaining, and transforming self-identity in a late modern context:

1. access to an unlimited diversity of people, images, and ideas as a result of the reorganization of space and time through transnational telecommunications networks,
2. the pervasive influence of experts who espouse conflicting interpretations of abstract systems of knowledge that impinge on every aspect of our lives from what we should eat to what we need to do to avoid destroying the natural resources of the earth, and
3. the need to cope with demands placed on us in many spheres of life that require a higher level of cognitive complexity than most adults in the United States, including the most highly educated, have.

These factors influence almost every Christian in a late modern society to some degree. Becoming aware of the dynamics these changes are bringing into play in our society and in our individual and family lives is a necessary step if we are to make more critical, informed responses to these changing dynamics. I turn now to the first part of my analysis, a brief excursus on the theme of postmodernity that has become so prevalent in academic circles.

Postmodernity

The term “postmodern” is used in a variety of conflicting and confusing ways. As a result some of the writers I find helpful specifically reject the use of the term. However, the term is prevalent in many disciplines in academia. The various perspectives that are embraced by the term have significant implications for theology, many positive and many negative. Vast numbers of young Christians are exposed to at least some aspect of

postmodern discourse if they attend almost any university. Therefore, I think it is important for Christian leaders to have at least some familiarity with postmodernism.

Because of the vast array of writers who identify themselves as postmodern or are regularly interpreted as falling within a postmodern perspective, even if they do not use the term, it is helpful to think of postmodern thought as a constellation of perspectives. Within this constellation there are some perspectives that emphasize deconstructive themes and practices. While there are family resemblances among perspectives that are dominantly deconstructive, there are also sharp differences. Other positions within the constellation affirm selected deconstructive practices, yet their clear emphasis is on *constructive* themes and practices. Despite some similarities, the differences between the perspectives in the constellation are sufficient to warrant differentiating between constructive and deconstructive postmodernism. In using the term “constellation,” I hope to make clear that deconstructive and constructive postmodernism are not mutually exclusive categories, although specific perspectives within the constellation may indeed be mutually exclusive. Dialogue among all the perspectives within the postmodern constellation will enrich our insights into the context in which we live, despite the significant differences that will persist, keeping the constellation from collapsing into one undifferentiated whole.

It is far beyond the scope of this project to provide even a cursory analysis of all the perspectives within this constellation. My purpose in briefly introducing two deconstructive postmodernists, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, is to point out how much is at stake in this discourse and why it is important for practical theologians to

take part in it. As one learns to expect when reflecting on perspectives within the postmodern constellation, Derrida and Lyotard are very different from one another; however, they have had a pervasive influence on many disciplines in North American higher education. The following three themes are exemplary of deconstructive postmodern perspectives that have particular significance for theology: the undecideability of meaning, the disappearance of the self, and the incredulity toward metanarratives.

These themes will be considered again in Chapter 2 from the perspective of theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., a constructive postmodernist. Because many of the writers who initiated the discussion of postmodernity are European, some participants in the discourse seem to think Cobb's use of the term "postmodern" is a recent addition. In fact, Cobb has been using the term in his writings since 1964.¹³ Cobb's theology is important for practical theologians because it is one of the perspectives within the postmodern constellation that supports a realistic and robust interpretation of Christian doctrines. As I explain in chapter two, Cobb offers a realistic theology of the immanence of the transcendent God who sustains our existence and draws us toward the life God would have us live. Cobb builds on the insights of physicist, mathematician, and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead to challenge some of the implicit assumptions of the modern worldview. By doing so, Cobb is able to clear the space for a scientifically intelligible

¹³ See, for example, John B. Cobb, Jr., "From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World," Centennial Review 8 (Spring 1964): 209-20; reprinted in Toward a New Christianity, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 241-52; and Radical Theology, eds. C. W. Christian and Glenn R. Wittig (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1967), 191-203. The article was also reprinted in

and philosophically defensible interpretation of Christian faith. It is my contention that the constructive postmodern perspective developed by Cobb, and many other theologians, has made and can continue to make many valuable contributions to all the fields of practical theology.¹⁴

I turn now to a consideration of three themes that are emphasized by many deconstructive postmodern writers. The perspective we take on these themes has significant implications for the possibility of developing and sustaining strong, mature Christian self-identities.

The Undecideability of Meaning

Jacques Derrida has been and continues to be one of the most influential deconstructive postmodernists. There is much disagreement among Derrida's interpreters as to what he really believes and is trying to say. I am not going to try to decide which interpretation is more accurate. Rather I am presenting one interpretation of Derrida's perspective on "meaning" that has been widely accepted and influential. In at least some of his writings, Derrida says that meaning is a wholly intralinguistic phenomenon, the result of an endless play of signifiers that refer to nothing outside the text.

several books in the 1970's. Cobb also uses the term "post-modern" in Christ in a Pluralistic World (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 25ff., 70, 122, 244. age

¹⁴Although they may not use the term "postmodern," there are several scholars in practical theology who have been influenced by Cobb and/or the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. See, for example: Don Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Don Browning, David Polk, and Ian Evison, eds., The Education of the Practical Theologian (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Gloria Durka and Joanmarie Smith, Modeling God (New York: Paulist Press, 1976); James N. Lapsley, Health and Salvation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972); Randolph Crump Miller, The Theory of Christian Education Practice (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980); Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Education for Continuity and Change (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983); Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1998); Joseph M. Webb, Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998).

see B.1b

Derrida advocates a process of deconstruction worked out from the structural linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. Because almost limitless meanings can be derived from the play of signifiers that constitute any text, Derrida believes we are free to create (or one might think we are condemned to deal with) an endless array of conflicting interpretations with no justifiable criteria for deciding in favor of any interpretation as “better” than another.¹⁵ As a result, meaning becomes “undecideable;” it must always be deferred.¹⁶ When this perspective is accepted without qualification, it leads to sheer relativism and nihilism.

Nihilism is not merely a philosophical dilemma. A deep and debilitating sense of meaninglessness drains any sense of hope from many people and communities in the United States. Cornel West argues that nihilism is the greatest challenge facing black

¹⁵See for example, Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26; Derrida, “Difference,” in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 142-43.

¹⁶In his discussion of language, Derrida tries to enlist the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce in support of his position. Derrida states, “Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the deconstruction of the transcendental signified, which at one time or another would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign.” See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 24. Derrida turns to Peirce for support because of Peirce’s “semiotic,” the theory that the meaning of one sign is another sign that can be substituted for it. There is a significant difference, however, between Peirce’s theory and the implications Derrida draws from it (perhaps a point that Derrida, if he were entirely consistent, would not even consider legitimate to raise, given his convictions about the “undecideability” of meaning). Nevertheless, although Peirce does say that we only think in signs, Peirce does not claim, as Derrida states that he does (*Of Grammatology*, 50), that “there is nothing but signs.”

In contrast to Derrida, Peirce speaks of a final interpretant, which he calls “the living interpretation.” See G. B. Madison, *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982). This final interpretant is not located among signifiers, or even within the text. It exists within the pragmatic realm of praxis. Peirce writes, “Consequently, the most perfect account of a concept that words can convey will consist in a description of the habit which that concept is calculated to produce.” For Peirce meaning is not caught in the endless freeplay of signifiers; rather, the meaning of a particular belief is found in the action to which it gives rise. (For an account of Peirce’s theory of signs that contrasts his “semiotics” with the “semiology” of Saussure, see Milton Singer, *Man’s Glassy Essence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). This does not mean, of course, that there are not multiple meanings, or

America. He defines nihilism as the “lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result” according to West, “is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world.”¹⁷ With such realities in mind, the argument that there is nothing beyond the text, that there can be no meaning other than the freeplay of signifiers, contains dangerous implications that reflect none of the playfulness in which writers like Derrida often enjoy engaging. For millions of people, meaninglessness is a life or death issue. The denial of any meaning beyond that generated by wordplay presents a direct challenge to practical theologians. As I explain in Chapter 2, this is a challenge that constructive postmodernists respond to in several helpful ways.

The Disappearance of the Self

Another issue addressed by many deconstructive postmodernists is the existence of the self. In its most radical form, the self is reduced to nothing but a site of conflicting discourse, that which is linguistically and socially constructed. The idea of the “disappearance of the subject” is a response to Descartes’ confidence in the ability of the autonomous rational thinker to extricate himself or herself from all biases in order to pursue objective knowledge. The presumption of this possibility underlies the faith modernity has in the objectivity of empirical science.

that the meaning may not change. But Peirce’s perspective does not support Derrida’s notion that meaning is undecidable.

¹⁷ Cornel West, Race Matters (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 14.

The dominant epistemology of the Enlightenment followed Descartes and Kant in placing the key to knowledge within the human subject. Writers who endorse a form of linguistic determinism move language into the central role that humans once occupied. Moving the emphasis from the human subject to language “decenters” the individual. For constructive postmodernists, the turn from the subject can have the positive result of recognizing that individuals exist in a fundamentally relational world, thus helping to challenge the values celebrated by the extreme forms of individual autonomy espoused in U.S. culture. Deconstructive postmodernists such as Derrida go much further, however. Derrida emphasizes the dominance of language in unconsciously structuring the human experience of reality and claims that this leads to the disappearance of the subject.

Selya Benhabib points out the disappearance of the subject into the chain of signifiers leads simultaneously to the disappearance of “concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy.”¹⁸ Benhabib challenges the adequacy of the postmodern elimination of the self, arguing that it “presupposes a remarkably crude version of individuation and socialization processes when compared with currently available social-scientific reflections on the subject.”¹⁹ Raising a number of critical questions that Cobb addresses directly in his constructive postmodern theology, Benhabib states:

we have to explain how a human infant can become the speaker of an infinitely meaningful number of sentences in a given natural language, how it acquires, that is, the competence to become a linguistic being; furthermore, we have to explain how every human infant can become the initiator of a unique life-story, of a

¹⁸ Selya Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 217-18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

meaningful tale—which certainly is only meaningful if we know the cultural codes under which it is constructed—but which we cannot predict even if we knew these cultural codes. . . . [W]here are the resources for that variation derived from? What is it that enables the self to ‘vary’ the gender codes? To resist hegemonic discourses? What psychic, intellectual or other resources of creativity and resistance must we attribute to subjects for such variation to be possible?²⁰

Benhabib points to the irony that just as some women are finally being perceived as qualified to participate in the dominant discourses of postindustrial, late modern cultures, their very existence as initiating, responsible, creative subjects is being dissolved into the chain of language.

If one accepts the most extreme deconstructionist position, it no longer makes sense to talk about nurturing Christian self-identities. At best such language can only refer to other language or to an illusion of self that does not, in fact, exist. The importance of practical theologians engaging in the discourse about the existence of a self is obvious.

Incredulity toward Metanarratives

One of the concerns of deconstructive postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard is totalitarianism. His analysis of the different forms of totalitarianism and the terror they bring in their wake leads him to differentiate between myths of origin and grand narratives as sources of totalitarianism. Myths of origin provide legitimation through appeal to an ethnic name. They fuel reigns of terror such as that perpetrated by the Nazi regime with its cry to protect and celebrate the “true and only human,” the Aryan.

²⁰ Ibid., 218.

Lyotard believes a contrasting kind of totalitarianism emerges from metanarratives that point not to origins but to an Idea (in the Kantian sense), a future to be realized.²¹

Lyotard argues that grand narratives or metanarratives provide a legitimating function through their claim to universality. They provide modernity with its “characteristic mode: the *project* [original emphasis], that is, the will directed toward a goal.”²² Lyotard argues that the modern project has been the project of universal Emancipation.

An aspect of the metanarrative of universal Emancipation is the belief affirmed by Kant, among others, that history inevitably moves toward the better.²³ Lyotard argues that the project of universal Emancipation, along with its faith in progress, has not been “forsaken or forgotten but destroyed, ‘liquidated.’” There are several modes of destruction, several names that are symbols for them. ‘Auschwitz’ can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the tragic ‘incompletion’ of modernity.”²⁴ Lyotard follows critical theorist Theodor Adorno in using Auschwitz as the symbol to “signify just how impoverished recent Western history seems from the point of view of the ‘modern’ project of the emancipation of humanity.” Auschwitz, along with other past and present genocides and “ethnic cleansings” that the symbol is intended to represent, reflects part of what Lyotard describes as the postmodern condition. He defines postmodernity, in part,

²¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Explained, eds. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefonis, Virginia Spate, and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 49-50.

²² *Ibid.*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

as an “incredulity toward metanarratives,”²⁵ an incredulity that arises naturally in response to any narrative that claims the ability of “situating [Auschwitz] in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed toward universal emancipation.”²⁶

It is no doubt the case that there is widespread suspicion of metanarratives, and for good reason. Yet what are the consequences of simply raising suspicions and deconstructing any effort that claims to have as its purpose the liberation of human beings from oppressive conditions? If we reject the value of moving toward a goal of universal human liberation, however idealistic and unachievable we know the goal to be, we will be tempted to do nothing but attend to the immediate concerns of our own lives. Those of us who are in a position in which we are paid for work that includes writing and arguing about such things are certainly not going to be the ones to pay the greatest price for giving up any hope of a better world, even as we face the horrors of Auschwitz and all it forces us to know about ourselves. If we exercise only our deconstructive talents, we will never get to the far more difficult task of offering constructive proposals. We will never have the energy or courage to take thoughtful actions in solidarity with those whose very lives are at great risk.

In fairness to the deconstructionists, it is important to note that many are deeply aware of and persuasively articulate their concerns for those with the least power and economic security. Lyotard, for example, argues that “technoscientific development has

²⁵ Lyotard first used the phrase “incredulity toward metanarratives” in the three-page introduction to The Postmodern Condition, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). He states, “simplyfying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* [original emphasis] as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

become a means of deepening the malaise” of late modern societies because it does not “answer to demands issuing from human needs. . . . We could say that humanity’s condition has become one of chasing after the process of the accumulation of new objects (both of practice and of thought).”²⁷ We face an ever-increasing complexity that divides humanity into two parts. “One faces the challenge of complexity, the other that ancient and terrible challenge of its own survival. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the failure of the modern project – a project that, need I remind you, once applied in principle to the whole of humanity.”²⁸ The forms of death that stalk those who are merely trying to survive are many.

It is important for Christians who seek to be disciples of the Messiah to face all the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual obstacles that keep us from attending to the deep human needs of those who are poor, ill or devalued and treated as lepers and outcasts in their society. Cynicism and despair can become paralyzing if we only dwell on our suspicions. In an ironic twist our suspicions can become the one metanarrative we fail to deconstruct. There are good reasons for the deconstructionist fear of metanarratives. However, Christians can avoid universalizing narratives that have too often led us to contribute to or participate in reigns of terror. This can be done without giving up a vital, identity-generating faith in the God of Jesus Christ, a God that constructive postmodernists believe we *can* know outside the confounding limits of an endless play of signifiers.

²⁷ Ibid., 78.

²⁸ Ibid., 79.

A Constructive Postmodern Alternative

In its extreme forms, deconstructive postmodernism seeks to overcome “the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence.”²⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., has been joined by David Griffin, Marjorie Suchocki, William Beardslee, Delwin Brown, Susan Nelson, Catherine Keller and others who propose a postmodern worldview that, in David Griffin’s words, is developed “through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts.” It involves “a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions. It rejects not science as such but only that scientism in which the data of the modern natural sciences are alone allowed to contribute to the construction of our worldview.”³⁰

Details of Cobb’s theological perspective, which offers one approach to a constructive postmodern theology is introduced in Chapter 2. However, before moving into that discussion, I turn to the concept of self-identity, a concept that continues to play a critical role in a constructive postmodern understanding of the self and reality.

Self-identity

Defining Self-identity

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am following sociologist Anthony Giddens in defining self-identity as the reflexive understanding a person has of himself or herself

²⁹ David Ray Griffin, “Introduction to SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought,” in Varieties of Postmodern Theology, eds. David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), xii.

³⁰ Ibid.

in terms of his or her ever-evolving autobiography. The concept of self-identity presupposes continuity across time and space; however, at the level of conscious self-identity, the continuity is generated from the individual's own interpretation of his or her life story.³¹

Because self-identity as defined here is restricted to one's self-understanding, it is an aspect of, but not identical with, the self. I think it is helpful to distinguish between the self, which includes the unconscious aspects of our existence, and the self-identity, which presupposes a self, but does not directly integrate unconscious material unless that material rises to consciousness. The focus on self-identity should not be understood as a denial of the significance of the unconscious. Our past experiences, which we may never remember fully, strongly influence our response to the world and the people whom we encounter. While our self-identity offers many clues regarding the nature of the unconscious influences in our lives, the specific focus of this dissertation is on the self-identity that we consciously create rather than on the unconscious dynamics that help drive it.

In the following analysis of self-identity, I emphasize three critical aspects: the reflexivity, impermanence, and narrative quality of self-identity. Within the analysis of the narrative quality of self-identity, I argue that it is important to recognize the roles psychologists often play in influencing the editing of our autobiographical narrative. I also argue that in considering the narrative quality of self-identity, scholars have not

³¹I am working with aspects of Anthony Giddens' analysis of self-identity, although I later place self-identity as he defines it within an articulated metaphysical framework that provides insights he does not

given sufficient attention to the multiplicity of narratives that constitute our self-identity.

It is my contention that most people sustain a multiplicity of variously edited autobiographical narratives and that this reality requires greater consideration.

Self-identity as Reflexive and Impermanent

The first important characteristic of self-identity that needs to be emphasized is its reflexivity. Self-identity does not refer to the way in which person A identifies or thinks about person B. Rather, self-identity refers to how person B thinks about him or herself. It is certainly the case that the ways people who are important to us think about us, or rather what we *think* they think about us, plays a significant role in the ongoing process of constructing our self-identity.³² However, self-identity has to do with the ways we each understand ourselves, regardless of whether or not others affirm the identity we have of ourselves. Clearly Mrs. Hamer had a self-identity that the majority of whites in Mississippi in the 1960s would not have granted her, if they had had the choice.

Because self-identities are reflexive, we cannot know what another person's self-identity is based on our perception of him or her. A person may have many accomplishments and appear to be healthy and happy. However, the privacy of the person's heart may harbor great self doubt and a deep emptiness. As clergy and Christian educators, we must be careful not to assume we have a clear sense of another person's self-identity, regardless of the way the person presents himself or herself to us. We may

consider. Anthony Giddens. Modernity and Self-identity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

³² See for example, George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). Mead's analysis of the self and mind as internalized social processes mediated through gesture continues to be influential in the ways theorists conceptualize the self.

be seeing only a very tiny facet of the person's sense of self, the facet that is deemed appropriate to be shared at church.

In addition to being reflexive, self-identities are impermanent. Our self-identity is an emerging, ever-evolving narrative. It necessarily changes over the course of our life because we are always having new experiences that subtly or radically alter the story of our lives. As long as we are breathing and have some degree of mental lucidity, we will have new experiences, including new experiences of our own body as it changes over time. People who have played primary roles in our life may die or move far away. A career we have long enjoyed and which played a key role in our self-identity may be terminated unexpectedly. We may discover a talent or meet a special person late in our life that changes the quality of our daily experience and our expectations for the future dramatically. For good or bad, our lives never remain the same, even when we wish they would. We all know things change, and these changes must be incorporated into our self-identity, our sense of who we are as we find ourselves turning yet another of life's corners.

The impermanence of self-identity has implications for practical theologians who are concerned about ways of encouraging and strengthening mature Christian self-identities. We need to be intentional in attending to issues of Christian self-identity, particularly during life transitions and critical life events for people of all ages. The fact that a person has a strong Christian self-identity at one point in his or her life does not assure that it will remain strong in the future. Similarly, people who have treated religion as a very peripheral matter in their lives may, for reasons unknown to us, become deeply

engaged in exploring the spiritual aspect of life and strengthening their commitment to God. In addition to being reflexive and impermanent, our self-identity takes a narrative form.

Narrative Quality of Self-identity

Sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that self-identity involves our capacity to keep an autobiographical narrative going.³³ To claim that self-identity has a narrative quality is not to claim that everyone has a clearly formulated narrative worked out in his or her mind. In an informal sense, however, when we account for ourselves, who we are and why we think, feel, and act as we do, we think in terms of stories that involve critical people and experiences that have been part of our history. Taken as a whole, the critical positive and negative experiences, events and people we remember and think about constitute the narrative of our life, a story in which we author a role, or more likely a series of changing roles, for ourselves as a character.

We obviously do not remember everything that has happened to us. Sometimes the stories we forget are crucial to who we are. Many people have had experiences that were so traumatic that they have been repressed completely. Such repressed experiences, which are not part of our conscious self-identity, often influence us. However, as long as we remain unaware of the experiences and their influence, they will not be identified in our reflexive narrative. The adequacy or inadequacy of our narrative as a relatively accurate map of the territory of our life is irrelevant in this sense: it is the map we have,

³³ Giddens, 54.

and unless something causes us to change it, it will influence the paths we take and the places where we expect to find mountains and rivers.³⁴

Influence of professionals on editing of our autobiography. When a person is troubled, one of the significant contributions of psychological counseling may be the therapist's ability to help a person narrate his or her life with some significant revisions. Harvard research psychiatrist Robert Coles argues that a substantial part of psychoanalysis involves the psychoanalyst's ability to "redeem" a patient by rendering the therapist's professional insights regarding the patient's troubles into a coherent narrative. The doctor performs a "reading" of the patient's life.³⁵ This reading gives the patient new possibilities for understanding his or her autobiography differently. Such a "reading" may have a definitive influence on a person's self-identity and subsequent life.

It is also important to reflect on the fact that psychoanalysts are working within a theoretic perspective that is a narrative in its own right, one particular way of narrating human psychological dynamics. An unreconstructed Freudian analyst, as one contemporary analyst recently identified herself to me, will "read" the client's life in terms of the story Freud told of the id, ego, superego, complexes, defense mechanisms and their various dynamics within a person's life. For Freud, as for most of his followers, one theme of this story includes the interpretation of religion as a sign of psychological weakness and immaturity.

³⁴ Korzybski's important axiom, "The map is not the territory," continues to require reinforcement. Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity (New York: Dutton, 1933).

³⁵ Coles, 167.

↑ first time cited; give full reference

Freud was unwavering in his argument that although religion had made some positive contributions to civilization, civilization would be better off when humans were psychologically healthy enough to forgo religion and depend instead on reason. For Freud “the defence against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge—a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion.”³⁶ Freud’s primary concern in The Future of an Illusion is with religious doctrines, their inability to be justified, and the harm they do to individuals psychologically. Near the end of the book he writes, “But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘*education to reality*’ [original emphasis]. Need I confess to you that the sole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step?”³⁷

Freud knew that his own view of human psychology was inevitably flawed and might, in fact, be an illusion itself, but that, if so, it would be different from religious illusions. “Apart from the fact that no penalty is imposed for not sharing them,” he argued, “my illusions are not, like religious ones, incapable of correction. They have not the character of a delusion. If experience should show—not to me, but to others after me, who think as I do—that we have been mistaken, we will give up our expectations.”³⁸

Based on this statement, at least, it seems clear that Freud underestimated the ways in which scientists—including psychoanalysts—can become dogmatically devoted

³⁶ Freud, 30. ← *1st time cited*

³⁷ Ibid., 63.

³⁸ Footnote

to the "Truth" of the paradigm they believe best explains the part of the world on which they focus. It is difficult for scientists to even recognize anomalies when a theory does not produce the expected results, as Thomas Kuhn's work has helped make clear.³⁹

Many psychologists no longer see Freud's perspective as helpful, and yet his attitude toward religion is shared by many psychological schools of thought. If this is the case for a particular psychologist, the ways that therapist encourages clients to revise their autobiographical narratives may discourage or at least downplay the value of religious faith in a person's life. Because of the respect granted to psychology in the United States, it could create great dissonance in many Christians' minds if their psychologist and their pastor had conflicting views of what life is about and how one should conduct one's life. Neither the therapist nor the pastor may ever know how the conflicting perspectives actually play out in the individual's private autobiographical narrative. In fact, the individual caught in the conflict may "edit out" information from his or her autobiography in speaking with the pastor and in speaking with the therapist so that they never become aware of the degree of conflict between their positions.

The problem of multiple autobiographies. The importance of narrative in constituting our self-identity is critical. However, in discussing self-identity as narrative, Giddens does not address the fact that we share different versions of our autobiographical narrative depending on the persons with whom we are talking and the relationships we

←³⁸ Ibid., 68.

³⁹ Thomas Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 52-65.

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have with them. These variously edited versions of our autobiography can be thought of as a concatenated meta-narrative that is critical in disclosing our psychological and spiritual health and maturity.

Competent communicators who are psychologically healthy do not share identical versions of their autobiography with each person they meet, regardless of the circumstance. The cultural context, the relationship we have with another person or group of persons who may be asking us about ourselves, our perception of the purpose for their interest, the time available, and so forth, are all variables that guide us in deciding what would be appropriate to say under the circumstances. Given the variety of circumstances we may find ourselves in over time, the multiple editions of our autobiography may reflect psychological health and wise discernment. It is also possible, however, that the multiple editions may reflect patterns of deception and manipulation. The only way to assess our own situation is to note honestly the differences in the editions of our autobiography and evaluate the psychological and spiritual soundness of our explanation for their occurrence. Do the reasons, as best we understand them, point to health or to lack of integrity?

The nature and extent of the differences among the “editions” is significant. People who present themselves as faithful Christians on Sunday and then present themselves as enthusiastic, amoral participants in schemes to take advantage of others during the week may be presenting autobiographical narratives in each context that have almost nothing to do with one another except that the voice narrating the contradictory stories comes out of but one body.

We may choose to tell some other person several of the versions of our autobiography. Or another person may be around us enough to actually overhear multiple versions as we talk to others within their hearing. However, in the final analysis, no one other than ourselves has the potential to know the entire *oeuvre*. An individual may choose not to reflect on the differences and consider their possible significance. However, no one else has the opportunity to do so unless the individual makes a full disclosure to another, something that can only be taken on trust, for the “full disclosure” might, in fact, be but one of the edited versions.

Although it can be a strategy for deceiving and taking advantage of others, telling different versions of our autobiography is normal and expected as we move from one context to another. In some cases, it is the better part of wisdom to edit carefully. For example, we may have different ways of explaining our job history, depending on the context in which we find ourselves. Narrating the story of one’s series of job changes and how we feel about them would likely be done quite differently when speaking with a prospective new boss as compared to a close friend one has known and trusted since childhood.

A person who presents different, contradictory versions of his or her autobiography to others in ways that are unhealthy may present a challenge to a therapist. The psychotherapist may never know about some of the contradictory ways the person presents to others during the very week the client comes in to bare his or her soul, or at least one edited version of it, to a therapist. Obviously, if a person holds back from telling the therapist about the discrepancies in the various autobiographies, the therapist

may not be able to help the person construct a “reading” that will be helpful. Therapists are well aware that some clients try to manipulate them into affirming a self-identity that the client is determined to maintain and even reinforce by engaging a therapist’s support for his or her view of the world.

Psychologists have reason to be concerned about the number, diversity, and content of edited versions of our autobiography. Clergy, Christian educators, and pastoral counselors have good reason to be concerned as well. The nature of the many facets of our self-identity has implications for the state of our self-identity as a Christian. What do we emphasize in one context and leave out completely in another? Do such changes involve efforts to deceive, or do the changes reflect sensitivity to the context and the other persons with whom we are sharing? Is our Christian faith critical to who we understand ourselves to be, or is it an attribute that we easily edit out? Do we find ourselves following Peter into the courtyard of the high priest as our model of one who denied being Jesus’ disciple three times on the very same evening he had sworn he would not desert Jesus or deny him, even if it meant he must die (Mark 14:66-72)? Or are we able to stand with the women who had been followers of Jesus who remained watching Jesus hanging on the cross rather than running away with the others (Mark 15:40-41)?

By not paying close attention to the ways in which we vary the story of who we are and why we do what we do, we fail to examine the explanation we give to ourselves for the differences. Our interpretation of the multiple editions of our autobiography constitutes another narrative, a meta-narrative, in which we explain to ourselves the reasons for the diverse, and perhaps contradictory, autobiographies we present to others.

Each version of one's autobiography may be accompanied by behaviors that would be unthinkable in the context in which a different version of our autobiography is shared. Church leaders exposed for sexually abusing youth in their care or embezzling church funds present shocking examples of radically contradictory behaviors.

If such inner contradictions go unreported or remain undiscovered, they still have a poisonous effect on the persons directly involved. When such stories become public, they also have disruptive and highly destructive effects on others in the congregation and within the larger church. In addition to whatever legal action it might be appropriate to take in a given case, an assessment of the pastor's psychological and spiritual health must include knowing how the pastor explains the contradictions to himself or herself. The degree of honesty and insight one brings to that meta-narrative may be an indicator of whether or not that pastor has enough inner strength and integrity to admit his or her sins and genuinely and energetically commit to redressing the wrongs done and changing his or her future behavior.

Although people may engage in conflicting behaviors and offer highly contradictory versions of their autobiography to different people, it would be misleading to assume that there is no sense of continuity in one's self-identity. Unless one suffers from mental illness and is unaware of the different selves one enacts, at a meta-level there is a story that provides a form of continuity, even if that continuity springs from a conviction that life is utterly meaningless and one can and should do whatever one pleases. As chaotic, destructive, and unpredictable as one's life may be when based on

such a story, there is, nevertheless, continuity to be discerned.⁴⁰

Our private autobiographical narrative at any given point in our lives represents the current state of our self-identity. Self-identity is critical because it strongly influences how we think, act, and feel in relationship to ourselves, others, and creation. In the private autobiography that constituted Mrs. Hamer's self-identity, she understood herself as a beloved child of God. She found special meaning in Ephesians 6:11-12. She believed that she and her colleagues were wrestling "'not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.'" This is what I think about when I think of my own work in the fight for freedom," she explained.⁴¹ Her faith gave her the inner courage and strength to withstand daily harassment and threats to her life while calling for the justice and righteousness that God demands for people who are poor and oppressed.

Our self-identity plays a critical role in determining whether or not we are living a Christian life. We may call ourselves Christians, but choosing to apply that label to ourselves does not say anything about the depth of our commitment to God or our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. The problem of sharing self-serving, unethically contradictory and deceptive versions of our autobiographical narrative and acting in ways that are inconsistent with a Christian life is not limited to the gross violations of some Christians.

⁴⁰ The degree of diversity in story and behavior varies along a continuum from healthy to pathological. Serial killers who maintain a respectable self-presentation in many contexts while knowingly carrying out heinous crimes under cover of night cannot be excused as merely engaging in the free-wheeling possibilities of postmodern life. While recognizing the occurrence of extreme forms of inner dissociation that require professional attention, this work does not address extreme forms that constitute criminality or pathology.

⁴¹ Footnote

If we are honest, we must all wrestle with the many ways we compromise and violate the vision of life God calls us to live. St. Paul struggled with his own sense that “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). In the midst of the cacophony of messages that inundate us from every side, how are we to discern the voice of God? How do we sustain the primacy of the “still, small voice” in the face of arrestingly intense distractions that pull our thoughts and feelings first one way and then another? It is the challenge of such questions that underscores the study of self-identity as a critical task for practical theologians

Sociological and Technological Changes Affecting Self-identity

Giddens argues that sociological and technological changes have taken place in late modern societies such as the United States that have a profound effect on the processes of creating, sustaining, and changing self-identities. He points out that “modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances.”⁴²

As a result of these processes, the individual’s self-identity is self-reflexively created in a way that is not possible in traditional societies. One may create a new autobiographical narrative that not only points to a very different future but also radically changes one’s interpretation of one’s past. People can move away from the geographic

⁴¹ Marsh, 26.

⁴² Giddens, 2.

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area and the community in which they were born and present themselves in a different way in a new context. People in mobile societies can do this again and again throughout their lives, if they so choose. As I discuss later in this chapter, the success of the small group movement in the United States has increased the ease of finding new contexts within which to “try out” a different self-identity. Among the disembedding mechanisms Giddens refers to, transnational telecommunication networks are particularly important in eliminating space and time as limits on the people and ideas to which we have access.

Space and Time No Longer Limit

The reorganization of space and time through transnational telecommunications networks makes it possible for us to learn about an unlimited diversity of people, ideas, and styles of life. We are able to “try on” diverse roles by engaging people all over the world. Daily e-mail interaction with a friend in Belgium may provide an opportunity for exploring aspects of ourselves that are unknown to friends who have worked with us for years in offices just down the hall. Through mass media we become aware of significantly different ways of thinking about life and about ourselves and who we want to be.

In addition to the implications of transnational telecommunications networks, space and time are also minimized as limiting factors because of the degree of mobility most people in the United States have. If we are not satisfied with our relationships, we can disembed ourselves from our current connections. If there are face-to-face relationships we wish to disengage from, the degree of mobility in our society makes it possible to pack up and move to a new geographic area. In larger cities, we can maintain

anonymity with our immediate neighbors and travel across town to a new job or to join a small group of others who have associated for the purpose of sharing a common interest or concern. We may never have had the concern before, but we can add it as we go about constructing a new self-identity.

The tremendous growth in the small group movement in the United States in the last few years has increased the opportunity for people to create voluntary communities that they can join or leave with relative ease. Such communities serve a number of important support functions for a large number of individuals. However, they are also contexts in which we can try out a new self-identity without too much risk. If we find we don't like what we are constructing, we can leave the group without difficulty and try a different one. Forty percent of all adults in the U.S. indicate that they are members of a small group that offers them care and support.⁴³ Participation cuts across socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and gender lines. The presence of these groups in all geographic regions of the U.S. increases the opportunities to associate with a group voluntarily as part of one's efforts to create a new identity.⁴⁴

People in late modern societies can go about an intentional, systematic reconstruction of self-identity in a way that is not possible in traditional societies. Self-

⁴³ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 4.

⁴⁴ Although there are many positive features to the small group movement, Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that the movement is so pervasive it is changing our society in significant ways that are not yet widely recognized. Of particular interest to practical theologians are Wuthnow's insights into the ways the availability of small groups is changing what people mean by the concepts of "community" and "spirituality." He believes small groups are inadvertently reinforcing individualism rather than contributing to growth in community, which is one of the goals of the movement. He also expresses concern that the spirituality encouraged in small groups is, in too many cases, based on nothing other than the principle that one should do what feels good because that's what God would want. In

identity in a traditional culture is inextricably embedded in the history of one's group. Kinship, geography and formal aspects of culture⁴⁵ provide the webs of meaning within which one's self-identity is formed.

Certainly self-identity changes over time in a traditional culture, too. One's identity as a parent is not the same as it was when one was a child. However, the range of possibilities and the degree of personal choice are limited within clearly discernible boundaries. The organization and meaning of space and time that is distinct to one's group deeply influences each individual's sense of reality and what is possible. Because the disembedding mechanisms are not present in traditional societies, there is social pressure to conform to the norms of the community. There are no alternative, voluntary communities to which one can turn if one violates the expectations of the community and is ostracized from it.

The reorganization of space and time in late modern societies contributes to the disappearance of ongoing, strong neighborhood communities. As a result, people can construct reality in ways that are quite different from the ways reality was constructed by one's older relatives. Reflexivity of self-identity characterizes life in societies in which reality can be constructed and reconstructed in radically different ways by the same person many times. People in all societies participate to some degree in constructing the social reality of their context. What is different in the late modern society is the speed of

cases where this is true, such a perspective also encourages individualism and undermines relational responsibility and accountability. See Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*.

⁴⁵Edward Hall defines the formal aspects of culture as those that are deeply embedded in culture and regarded as "true" and nonnegotiable. Edward Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Bantam, 1959).

change, access to vast amounts of information, and the mobility of individuals.

“Knowing that” and “knowing how”. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen analyzes some of the psychological consequences of these sociological changes. Gergen argues that as a result of our constant exposure to other people’s ways of construing life, in both real life and fiction, we change in two major ways. First, the exposure increases our capacity for “knowing that.”⁴⁶ Through mass media we are exposed to all kinds of people and situations we would never have encountered otherwise. In the average five hours per day that people watch television in the United States, and in the hours people spend exploring the Internet, people learn significantly more about the social world than was possible previously. Through mass media people have access to the inspiring, creative, and sometimes demonic fantasy worlds of others as well.

The increased capacity for “knowing that” – knowing that people do such things in their lives or in their imaginations – leads to the second major change that occurs, the increase in our capacity for “knowing how.”⁴⁷ In the past two years on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Winfrey has given public recognition on a regular basis to corporations who have responded to her challenge for them to step forward and give the money to build a Habitat for Humanity home in the town where the company is located. Often the companies’ employees also participate with the actual construction of the home. The CEO’s and other employees of such corporations have been invited to appear on her program to explain who told them about what Winfrey was doing, and how they got

⁴⁶ Kenneth J. Gergen, The Saturated Self (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 69.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 69.

involved. Through the challenge to corporations and other groups, Winfrey met her goal of building 200 new Habitat houses in two years.⁴⁸

In such positive cases, people with the power to bring about such a decision in a company came to “know that” other companies were getting involved in building Habitat for Humanity homes and receiving national recognition for their efforts. The “knowing that” was coupled with a “knowing how” that has led to thousands of people getting involved in ways that are good for lots of people.

Unfortunately, the stories we hear about with greater frequency are the tragedies that are reported when children and adults get ideas for destructive and even criminal behavior from television movies, news reports, or some other mass media genre and carry out the destructive actions themselves. The mass media provided them with knowledge that people, real or fictional ones, carry out such acts, and provided them with the “know how” to emulate the people they watched or heard about on screen. As a result of two high school seniors murdering 13 people before turning their guns on themselves at Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999, people who listened to the story on the news or read about it in the papers realized, if they had not known before, that one can learn how to make many kinds of bombs on the Internet.

Hearing what the students had done at Columbine may have contributed to a rash of copycat threats in high schools throughout the country and to additional incidents in which other students took guns into schools and shot classmates. The vast range of “knowing that” and “knowing how” to which we are exposed increases radically the ways

⁴⁸ Shawn Reeves, “The Houses that Oprah Built,” Habitat World, Oct./Nov. 1999, 15.

we can begin to think about ourselves, our own lives, and others, for better or worse.

In addition to increasing geometrically what we can know about, transnational electronic telecommunication networks often increase the number of relationships we sustain. This has consequences for expanding the criteria in terms of which we evaluate ourselves.

Expanding sources for self-evaluation. Gergen argues that through media and through technology that allows us to maintain relationships with a large number of people from our past even as we add new relationships in the present, we become socially saturated selves. Through the process of social saturation, “we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. . . . Each of the selves we acquire from others can contribute to inner dialogues, private discussions we have with ourselves about all manner of persons, events, and issues.”⁴⁹

Through advanced technology, we are now able to keep up with any number of relationships from the past that would not have been sustained if letter writing were required. In addition, the Internet gives us a way to sustain connections with new and interesting people we encounter in our personal and professional lives. All these new associates join the people we meet through print and electronic media in supplying us with criteria for self-evaluation, which is likely to increase self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy. Gergen explains the dynamic:

Because many of these criteria for self-evaluation are incorporated into the self . . . they are free to speak at any moment. The problem with values is that they are sufficient unto themselves. To value justice, for example is to say nothing of the

⁴⁹ Gergen, Saturated Self, 72.

value of love; investing in duty will blind importance of any alternative value. And so it is with a chorus of social ghosts. Each voice of value stands to discredit all that does not meet its standard. All the voices at odds with one's current conduct thus stand as internal critics, scolding, ridiculing, and robbing action of its potential for fulfillment. One settles in front of the television for enjoyment, and the chorus begins: 'twelve-year-old,' 'couch potato,' 'lazy,' 'irresponsible' . . . One sits down with a good book, and again, 'sedentary,' 'antisocial,' 'inefficient,' 'fantasist'. . . Join friends for a game of tennis and 'skin cancer,' 'shirker of household duties,' 'underexercised,' 'overly competitive' come up. Work late and it is 'workaholic,' 'heart attack-prone,' 'overly ambitious,' 'irresponsible family member.' Each moment is enveloped in the guilt born of all that was possible but now foreclosed.⁵⁰

Despite his argument that we are socially saturated and "internally over populated," Gergen joins the deconstructive postmodernists in celebrating the opening up of possibilities. In Gergen's words, "For the postmodern, the vocabularies of personhood are less mirrors of truth than they are means of relating. There is little reason to suppress any voice. Rather, with each new vocabulary or form of expression, one appropriates the world in a different way, sensing aspects of existence in one that are hidden or absent in another, opening capacities for relatedness in one modality that are otherwise hindered."⁵¹ Many aspects of Gergen's analysis are insightful and important for practical theologians to consider. Nevertheless, Gergen positions himself as a deconstructive postmodernist who argues that the constructivist analysis of the human being exhausts what there is to say or know. This leads him to a fairly extreme relativist conclusion that there is little reason to suppress any voice. Valuing and encouraging a significant plurality of voices is critically important. Nevertheless, in valorizing pluralism we must be able to name

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁵¹ Ibid., 247.

simultaneously that within ourselves and within others that is evil. Every point of view is not equal, as sheer relativists would lead us to believe.

Diversity of values does not imply equality of values. Over the fourth of July holiday week-end, 1999, in the space of about 36 hours, a white college student from the University of Illinois who was a member of the World Church of the Creator, an anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, white supremacist organization, killed the 43-year-old African-American former basketball coach from Northwestern University as he was jogging in his neighborhood with his two children in Skokie, Illinois; shot and wounded six Orthodox Jews walking home from synagogue on the Sabbath; shot at two Asian-Americans sitting in their car at an intersection; and shot and killed a Korean-American graduate student walking out of a Korean church on Sunday morning in Bloomington, Indiana.⁵²

After a year in which an African American man, James Byrd, was grabbed as he walked along the road in Jasper, Texas, chained behind a pickup and dragged to his death by other men committed to white supremacist ideology, and Matthew Shephard was beaten and left to die tied up to a fence in the bitter cold of Montana because he was gay, it seems unthinkable to claim that there is little reason to suppress any voice. I am not suggesting that Gergen would condone any of these vicious acts. However, Christians must join with others in challenging any version of postmodernism that claims all perspectives are relative or that leads to total disengagement with the realities of society.

⁵² The initial report of the killings was on the front page of the New York Times, 5 July, 1999, A1, 7.

The world has always been violent and filled with hate. What has changed is the widespread availability of sophisticated weaponry and information for constructing explosive devices and carrying out various forms of destruction against specific groups of people and property that is important to them. With our scientific “advancements” we have increased the ways and the ease of carrying out violence against others. For the first time, humans are now capable of such destructive behavior that the entire earth could become uninhabitable. Given the reality in which we find ourselves living today, it is unacceptable for Christians not to challenge any view that ignores the evil that human beings regularly perpetrate on one another and on God’s creation.

In a society deeply committed to free speech, which I support, Christians have a responsibility to stand with those who are targets of hatred and bigotry and speak out against it. Elie Weisel, who spent years of his childhood in Nazi concentration camps, wrote recently that for the first time since the end of the World War II, he has become afraid that what happened in Nazi Germany could happen again. Weisel says he believed after the war that when people realized the truth of what had been done, it would be impossible for it to ever happen again. He now thinks that he was much too optimistic.⁵³ The reality of Christian contributions to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism from the first century through the twentieth, makes it imperative for Christians to acknowledge and repent of our complicity in anti-Semitism, especially when encouraging the development

⁵³ Elie Weisel, “Why I Am Afraid,” Explorations 13, No. 1 (1999), 2.

of a strong Christian self-identity.⁵⁴ I return to the importance of thinking through Christian self-identity in light of Auschwitz in chapters three and four.

Certainly Hitler did not require the technological potential of a transnational electronic communications network to plan and carry out his war against the Jews and others who threatened to “taint” the ethnic purity of the Aryan race. What Hitler was doing was very public and highly organized. People around the world knew about his hate-filled vision yet were, for the most part, unresponsive until their own personal interests were at stake.

Because of the changes in space and time that Giddens describes, people are now able to connect with neo-Nazi hate groups all over the world without anyone else being aware of their personal involvement. Groups such as the Idaho-based Aryan Nation and the World Church of God, which is implicated in the most recent spate of attacks on African Americans, Jews, and Asian-Americans in Illinois and Indiana and under suspicion for the recent fire bombing of three synagogues in Detroit, are very willing to speak publicly about their views. However, they also are able to develop a vast number of connections with people all over the world to encourage their participation and commitment to a white supremacist narrative.

Individuals such as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the young men who carried out the murders at Columbine High School in Colorado in the spring of 1999, can be

⁵⁴ For a detailed historical overview of Christian contributions to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*; John Cobb addresses the importance of this issue in contributing to the lukewarmness of Christians in the oldline denominations. See Cobb, *Reclaiming the Church*, 15-16.

deeply influenced by such hate groups without anyone in their family, work, or social group realizing the seriousness of what is happening until it is too late. Harris and Klebold were fascinated by white supremacist and neo-Nazi propaganda. This came as a great shock to Klebold's family because Dylan Klebold's own mother is Jewish. He participated in both Christian and Jewish practices in his family.

These difficult and complex realities are part of the context in which we live as we strive to think critically about developing and sustaining Christian self-identities and constructive Christian lives that serve the Spirit of God and not the spirits of distraction and destruction. Another significant feature of a late modern society becomes apparent as we think about how to approach the serious problems that face us, whether it be ways of reducing violence in our country, the destruction of the earth's resources, or the growing gap between the rich and the poor. In every area, there are identifiable experts to whom we turn to help us clarify the nature of the problems and seek constructive solutions. The problem that immediately arises is the fact that we can obtain thoughtful yet contradictory expert opinion about everything from the nature of God to the causes of violence, the economy, the health of the earth, the way the Bible was written, the danger of nuclear proliferation, the best way to educate a child, and the effects of the global economy, to name but a few.

The influence of abstract systems. The professional discourse that deals with each of these areas reflects an abstract system of expert knowledge that operates on a principle of methodological doubt. No matter how confident researchers may be about the safety of certain chemicals or the validity of a particular method for dating ancient manuscripts,

expert knowledge is always open to revision based on new data. Giddens points out that “the integral relation between modernity and radical doubt is an issue which, once exposed to view, is not only disturbing to philosophers but is *existentially troubling* [original emphasis] for ordinary individuals.”⁵⁵ The deconstructive postmodern challenge to the Enlightenment ideal of objective rationality has served to deepen and expand the sense of doubt, ushering in what Richard Bernstein refers to as “Cartesian anxiety,” the fear that if there is no foundation, no objective truth, then we will face chaos, madness, a radical, nihilistic relativism.⁵⁶

The proliferation of information and the awareness of multiple ways of understanding reality increases the pervasiveness of radical doubt.⁵⁷ Although we may be deeply convinced by our current construction of reality, almost everyone is aware of the significantly different ways in which others construe reality. The knowledge that intelligent, compassionate, ethical people perceive the world in a way that is significantly different from our own perceptions cannot help but cause us, if we are thoughtful, to pause.

The more conscious we are of the degree to which people construct reality in very different ways, the more aware we become of the possibilities for reconstructing our own identity, if we are dissatisfied with our current sense of self. The language of “recreating ourselves” has become part of the language of popular culture. Countless books in the

⁵⁵ Giddens, 21.

⁵⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16-19.

⁵⁷ Giddens, 21.

self-help section of the local bookstore promise new insights and specific strategies to help one accomplish the recreation of the self. At key transition points in one's life, or when "fateful decisions" must be made, the opportunity to recreate oneself is intensified and more apparent.⁵⁸

As a result of the disembedding processes operating in our society, when we need advice or go through significant transitions in our life, we are unlikely to be surrounded by extended families and multiple generations of kin who can provide wisdom and guidance from their life experiences. Rather than turning to a family member when we need help in knowing how to handle grief, heal after a divorce, handle our money, lose weight, or treat the flu, we are likely to turn to an expert through either direct consultation, reading a book, exploring information on the Internet, or listening to a radio or television program.

In all of these areas, and countless others, we find respected experts who disagree with one another about what actions we should take. Those differences of opinion only increase our awareness of the degree of risk with which we constantly live. The awareness of risk, coupled with the pervasiveness of radical doubt, feeds a sense of anxiety. Finally, in each area, we must choose some actions and reject others, yet new information may continually chip away at our confidence in the wisdom of our choices.

Since even an expert can only be an expert in one small segment of life, most of the time we are all lay persons influenced by abstract systems we cannot understand fully.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

We weigh the choices as best we can and act or refuse to act, which is, of course, an act with its own set of consequences. In so doing we engage in the ongoing process of constituting our self-identity. On the one hand, if we are able to evaluate the information with a relative degree of confidence and make a good decision, we may see ourselves as stronger and more capable than we previously thought. On the other hand, if we become overwhelmed by the competing recommendations and are incapable of doing what we really need to do, the experience is likely to leave us thinking of ourselves as incompetent, helpless, and weak. In either case, the need to access expert information and evaluate among competing points of view at critical times in our life increases the mental burden we must carry and increases levels of stress.

Demands for greater cognitive complexity. Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan argues that one of the reasons stress levels are rising is the increasing degree of cognitive complexity required of us in work settings, within the family, in educational efforts, and in other realms of life as well. The need to access abstract systems of knowledge as mediated through the conflicting perspectives of experts is only one aspect of the increasing complexity.

The culture in many U.S. corporations is changing in ways that increase the mental burden for employees. More people are finding themselves responsible for types of planning and evaluation that used to be carried out at higher levels or in other divisions of the organization. Kegan argues that in many cases people are being expected to function more as entrepreneurs than as people responsible for clearly defined jobs with evaluation criteria specified. He quotes one high-level corporate manager whose job, at

the same desk, for the same pay, with the same secretary was given a new title--president--of a company within a company. In explaining the effects of the change, the man stated:

It's definitely a different ballgame!. . . I guess you could say before I was president, I was playing a game of catch. Anderson [the president of the corporation within which the new company was formed] would throw things at me and I'd catch them. I'd throw things back at him and he'd catch them. A good long game of catch. And now? Now I'd say I'm a juggler. There's not one ball, there are five, and then there are ten, and then there are fifteen! People keep tossing more in to me to add to those I'm juggling. But I'm not throwing to anyone. I'm just throwing them into the air. As soon as I get them I just toss them back into the air. And my job as the juggler is to keep them all going up there, not let any of them drop to the ground. . . . My arms are getting awfully tired, and I'm not exactly sure what I did to deserve this wonderful job.⁵⁹

Many professionals in different kinds of organizations and institutions in the United States, including the church and academia, can relate to this example.

Kegan relates the increase in mental demands placed on people in many different spheres of society to the issue of cognitive complexity. Kegan's theory is that from birth individuals find themselves embedded in an environment that places certain kinds of mental demands on them. Our minds develop through an interactive relationship with this environment. The kinds of cognitive complexity Kegan is concerned about focuses on the increasingly complex ways in which people are able to organize experience. His theory does not focus on the content of what we think about but rather how we think, the order of cognitive complexity we are capable of handling.

The basic structure or logic of cognitive complexity involves an analysis of what functions as "object" and what functions as "subject" for us. An object "refers to those

⁵⁹ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 147, 151.

elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate on.”⁶⁰

That which functions as “subject” for us at a given point in our cognitive development involves “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in.”⁶¹ One of the critical points Kegan makes that has significant implications for clergy and educators is that “we cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject.”⁶² If we are so embedded in a particular youth culture, academic culture, or corporate culture that we experience ourselves as fully identified with it, we will be unable to step back and reflect on it as something distinct from ourselves. Educational efforts that encourage us to question or reject aspects of a culture in which we are psychologically embedded will be threatening and appear very costly to us.

Kegan argues that we liberate ourselves from that in which we have been embedded so that “we can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had’ by it.” He believes this is the most powerful way

to conceptualize the growth of the mind. It is a way of conceptualizing the growth of the mind that is faithful to the self-psychology of the West and to the ‘wisdom literature’ of the East. The roshis and lamas speak to the growth of the mind in terms of our developing ability to relate to what we were formerly attached to. The experiencing that our subject-object principle enables is very close to what both East and West mean by ‘consciousness.’⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁶¹ Ibid., 32.

⁶² Ibid., 32.

⁶³ Ibid., 34.

Kegan analyzes five orders of consciousness in terms of increasingly complex principles for organizing experience. Moving beyond Piaget, he broadens the understanding of the operative principle to include not only thinking, but also the affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal aspects of self. He also extends the development of cognitive complexity beyond adolescence into adulthood.

There are many provocative implications of Kegan's theory of cognitive complexity for theological education, as well as Christian education and preaching within the life of the congregation. These implications are developed in chapter four. The issue that is relevant at this point in the discussion is this: studies show that most adults in the United States are at the third order of cognitive complexity working toward the fourth; however, in many realms of the late modern world, including parenting, partnering, working, communicating between women and men, learning, and psychotherapy, adults are being asked to respond with a fifth level of cognitive complexity. For those of us who are at the fourth order of complexity, or working toward it, the fifth order demands are clearly beyond us.

We are indeed "in over our head." Kegan claims that the feeling is common, stressful, and frightening. Our sense of risk increases as does our sense of vulnerability. The sociological and technological changes that have occurred in the past thirty years have increased the demands on us beyond the level of consciousness achieved by the vast majority of us. He argues that over time our mind, through interaction with the demands of the environment, does develop greater and greater orders of complexity, if the person is embedded in a culture that both supports and protects the person while at the same time

encouraging him or her toward the greater orders of complexity with all the risk and danger such moves seem to entail to the individual going through them. Even when a healthy culture is present that both holds and lets go of the individual, the process takes time, and we have now created an environment that is out in front of all but a very small percentage of us developmentally.

As a result of the “in over our head” experience, our self-identity can change from one in which we experience ourselves as competent and capable of making a contribution in life to one in which we feel so inundated by things we do not quite understand that we feel incompetent and become discouraged and depressed. The reality is, our professional situations may have changed so much in a short time that we indeed are less competent, in terms of not knowing the latest information in our field or not being able to take advantage of computer technology that is now essential in most contexts, or not being able to juggle all the new balls that are being thrown to us in the company reorganization. Similarly, in other realms of life Kegan analyzes, such as learning, parenting, and partnering, we may indeed be less able to handle the demands in each area than we would like. Over time, our self-identity will begin to reflect the effects of the strain. It is not insignificant that the three most common medications doctors prescribe today are for depression, ulcers, and pain, all of which are exacerbated, if not in some cases created, by unrelieved levels of stress.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ For a lay person’s look at the new field of psychoneuroimmunology, a field that focuses on the effect of our mental state on the neurological system that in turn influences the health of the immune system, see the work of Harvard psychoneuroimmunologist Joan Borysenko with Larry Rothstein, Minding the Body, Mending the Mind (Toronto: Bantam, 1987).

Kegan's analysis of the order of cognitive complexity that is being demanded of us in many spheres in our society is quite helpful in the sense that it can give us some relief to know that we are not alone, and it is not merely our own mind that seems not to be functioning in an adequate way any more. Nevertheless, the reality he describes in terms of the mental burden many people are experiencing is likely only to increase, and there are no easy answers that would resolve the problem. We can't roll back science and technology to a stage when we had greater ability to manage the demands that were placed on us, nor can we do much to speed up the growth of the mind so that it will catch up more quickly to the demands being placed on it.

Lyotard's analysis of our condition is quite relevant to this point. He argues that "technoscientific development has become a means of deepening the malaise rather than allaying it. It is no longer possible to call development progress. It seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us. It does not answer to demands issuing from human needs."⁶⁵ Lyotard make a further point that is critical to keep in mind as we discuss the growing complexity and the implications for Christian life. He points out that this condition tends to separate human beings into two very different groups: those who are struggling with the challenge of complexity and those that face "that ancient and terrible challenge of its own survival."⁶⁶ Christians who are in the position to think seriously about complexity and the effect it has on all of life must not lose sight of Christ beckoning us to attend to those who are stalked daily by the

⁶⁵ Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

specter of physical and/or psychological death.

If the only possibilities for understanding and responding to the condition of late modern society are the ones identified by sociologists, psychologists, environmentalists, economists, and experts in other disciplines, there would be understandable reason for people to give up all hope. Because of the disembedding mechanisms in our society, many of us find ourselves fairly isolated, without a significant community of like-minded people with whom we might work to make constructive changes. Most people have little faith that the government is capable of solving the major problems we face. It seems that politicians cannot get elected to high office without being so beholden to special interest groups for the vast amounts of money it takes to run a successful campaign that they are unable to make decisions determined by the common good.

The litany of serious problems we could recite to one another is long enough to overwhelm anyone, even those among us who have developed a fifth order consciousness! Nevertheless, faithful Christians do keep moving forward, ever hopeful, even if not very optimistic. The reason for the hope stems from the faith that in fact the variables identified by the experts are not the only variables in the equation. The additional variable that is not mentioned in the social science literature is the immanence of the Spirit of the transcendent God within us and within the world. It is the reality of God and the hope God offers to which I now turn in Chapter 2, "Envisioning a Spirit-filled World."

CHAPTER 2

Envisioning a Spirit-filled World

In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of self-identity in influencing how we understand and relate to ourselves, others, and all of creation. I explored sociological and technological challenges that complicate the process of developing and sustaining faithful, mature Christian self-identities in ourselves and others in a mobile, highly technologized, late modern society such as the United States.

The intense energy flows that draw our attention away from awareness of God and the ways of God can overtake our lives rather easily. In late modern societies, most people will not be navigating these treacherous energy flows while surrounded by a historically-rooted, loving, theologically wise faith community of family and friends who will be watching out for them, ready to guide, assist, and protect them or welcome them back to a warm, healing shelter if they venture into dangerous rapids and become injured-physically, mentally, or spiritually.

Despite the destructive forces in society, our Christian faith calls us to engage the world and challenge the forces that destroy rather than generate life. In the face of the horrendous realities that threaten millions of people daily as well as the Earth itself, it is hard to engage the world and sustain hope. As Christians, our commitment springs from the conviction that this Earth is part of God's creation, that each child who is born is a beloved child of God. Our hope springs from the faith that we do not face the life-destroying realities of the world alone. The immanent Spirit of God is with us to guide and sustain us – “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with

me" (Ps. 23:4).¹ When human and non-human creatures suffer, when creation suffers, God suffers (as Matthew 25 suggests). The Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). It is through the work of the Spirit that we are able to reach out to our neighbors throughout the world in friendship and expansive love. Such love calls us to work for justice and mercy that all may have abundant life and experience the joy of God.

It is my contention that the Spirit of God is a real presence actively involved in our individual lives and in the world as a whole. The late modern worldview rejects such a claim as unwarranted. Without faith in something beyond ourselves, however, there is little, if any, reason for hope that we will be able to redirect destructive energy patterns toward that which brings creative inspiration rather than cynicism and despair, life rather than death. Awareness of the complexity and severity of the problems that need to be addressed, unless combined with a vision that engenders meaning and hope, simply breed apathy or despair.

If people believe life is fundamentally meaningless and what they do makes little difference anyway, what chance is there for expansive love, hope and constructive action to be generated and sustained? As discussed in the first chapter, one currently influential interpretation of reality is the relativistic nihilism espoused by some deconstructive postmodernists. As I explained, Lyotard writes forcefully against the evils of totalitarianism. The worldview he affirms, however, provides no warrant for affirming the inherent value of all humans, creatures, and nature. Without such warrants embedded in one's understanding or "story" of what life is all about, that story can be used by others

¹ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

↑ The footnote on p. 76 is also numbered 1. Either re-number all footnotes in Chapter, or make this an asterisk. here + in the text above. That would be

judging, but it can work.

as the rationale for evil the original author would deplore. There would, however, be nothing within the story itself to challenge the perpetrators' actions.

Theologian John Cobb rejects the worldview of nihilistic relativists because he believes it emerges from inaccurate presuppositions that undergird the late modern worldview. By challenging the inaccurate presuppositions, we can avoid following the trajectory of the late modern worldview to its logical conclusion, a conclusion that embraces a materialistic worldview devoid of values, truth, meaning, purpose, and the sacred.

The three-fold thesis of this chapter is (1) that the immanent Spirit of the transcendent God is a vital, ontological reality that creates, sustains, and transforms the world, (2) that the Spirit of God makes possible human freedom from biological, psychological, and sociological determinism by calling us forward to embody new God-given possibilities that offer us the potential to creatively transform our self-identity, our relations with one another and all of creation in ways that more fully express God's vision for the world, and (3) that because the Spirit works persuasively rather than coercively, our acknowledgment of the reality of Spirit and our responsiveness to the Spirit's guidance in our lives and in the world make a difference in what the Spirit can accomplish.

In the first section of the chapter, I address the claim for the immanence of God by looking at biblical texts and theological claims for God's immanence in the historical theology of Calvin, Wesley, and Edwards. Having considered this support for the immanence of the transcendent God, I next, in the second section, look at the reasons why

this claim is rejected by those who affirm the late modern worldview. I then explore the ways in which constructive postmodern theologian John Cobb critically appropriates the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead to challenge the presuppositions of the late modern worldview, thus opening the way for offering a realistic theology of the immanence of the transcendent God.

Many contemporary philosophers and scientists espouse theoretic perspectives consonant with the presuppositions of the late modern worldview, which leads them to deny the possibility of the sacred.¹ Because there are scientifically and philosophically viable alternatives to such theories, it is important for religious educators and clergy to be familiar with them. If sound scientific and philosophical perspectives exist that are more congenial to belief in the reality of God, knowledge of such perspectives may encourage Christians to take their faith more seriously.

The Immanence of the Transcendent God

In this section of the chapter, I look at biblical texts and historical theological claims for God's immanence. Within the biblical understanding of reality, it is quite clear that the transcendent God is understood as immanent. The biblical understanding of God's immanence is strongly affirmed in historical theology. I look briefly at the emphasis on immanence in the theology of John Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards.

¹ For discussions of the presuppositions of the late modern worldview, see John B. Cobb, Jr., "Ecology, Science, and Religion: Toward a Postmodern Worldview," in The Reenchantment of Science, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 99-113; and Griffin, God and Religion in the Postmodern World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 13-27. For a detailed discussion of current materialist and dualist perspectives on reality, see Griffin, Unsnarling the World-Knot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 46-76.

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Biblical Narratives and Metaphors that Attest to God's Immanence

A number of metaphors are used in biblical texts to suggest not only the many dimensions but also the sheer mystery of the Spirit of God's immanence. Moltmann identifies four categories of metaphors for the Spirit in scripture: personal metaphors, specifically Spirit as Lord, mother, and judge;² formative metaphors, which suggest energy, space, or a configuration of life, a gestalt;³ movement metaphors, such as wind, fire, and the creative, energizing force of eternal love;⁴ and mystical metaphors of light, water, and fertility.⁵ These categories are suggestive of the range of experiences people attribute to the presence and action of the Spirit in their lives and in the world. They are all used in ways that suggest the intimacy and immanence of the Spirit of God.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore all of the metaphors used in biblical texts to express the diverse aspects of the Spirit. I am focusing only on metaphors and narratives that illumine two of the critical roles the Spirit plays in biblical texts: the Spirit as the source of life and as the source of freedom.

God creates and sustains life. According to the creation story in Genesis, the Spirit of God created the world, including human life. "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit [*ruach*] of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2 RSV). Etymologically, the Hebrew word

²Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 270-74.

³Ibid., 274-78.

⁴Ibid., 278-81.

⁵Ibid., 281-85.

for spirit, *ruach*, is part of the natural world, a meteorological term referring to “moving, agitated air, i.e. the wind.”⁶ When used in relationship to human beings, however, it refers to our breath. Consequently, the spirit is an essential aspect of life. “It is the vitality-giving part of the human *physis*, or if you will, its spiriting element.”⁷

The characteristics associated with *ruach* also apply to the Hebrew term for breath, *neshama*. These two terms are used synonymously in Hebrew texts and are virtually interchangeable. The term *neshama* is used in the second version of the creation story, in which God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and “breathed into his nostrils the breath (*neshama*) of life” so that “the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7).

Old Testament scholar Rolf Knierim emphasizes that although it is not explicitly stated in the passages that relate the creation of life, it is implied that God not only creates but sustains life by

upholding, rather than terminating, the existence of the cosmic air which living beings organically and naturally breathe once they are connected with it. Their connection with the already and always existing cosmic—no longer chaotic!--air means that each individual’s existence as a living being is, before everything else, fundamentally and forever, indissolubly imbedded in and dependent on the order of creation.⁸

Physiologically, we understand our dependence on cosmic air to sustain life. In biblical imagery it is God who gives and takes away breath. For example, in Psalm 104 the psalmist names many of the creatures God has created and says,

these all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;

⁶ Rolf P. Knierim, “The Spirituality of the Old Testament,” in Rolf P. Knierim, The Task of Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 272.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 295.

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
 when you take away their breath [*neshama*],
 they die and return to their dust.
 When you send forth your spirit [*ruach*],
 they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. (Ps. 104: 27-30)

It is because of the creating, sustaining work of the Spirit of God that the psalmist calls for the Lord to be blessed and praised.

Another frequently used metaphor that points to God's significance in creating and sustaining life is God as the source of water. The psalmist notes that God waters the earth and that "the river of God is full of water" (Ps. 65:9). When the Hebrews are wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, they find no water. God responds by telling Moses to hit a rock with his stick, after which water flows from the rock, reassuring the people that God is with them (Exod. 17:6).

The water of God is described as water given without charge so that "everyone who thirsts" may "come to the waters" (Isa. 55:1). Although there is no charge, it is necessary for us to "come to the waters." The prophet Jeremiah brings God's accusation that people have forsaken "the fountain of living water" (Jer. 2:13).

The metaphor of God as the source of the water of life is echoed in New Testament texts. In the gospel attributed to John, we are told a story of Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman at a well in which he uses this imagery. Jesus tells her that he can give her "living water" that will allow her never to be thirsty again. In fact this living water will become in those who have it "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life"

(John 4:14). In the apocalyptic vision presented in the book of Revelation, the “river of the water of life” is seen flowing from the throne of God (Rev. 22:1).

The emphasis in the Bible on God as the One who gives and sustains life does not imply a pantheism in which God is identified with nature. The biblical understanding of Spirit makes a clear distinction between the historical particularities of life and the meaning they take on because of God’s presence in them. This understanding leads to a differentiation between the world and God while at the same time affirming that there is no separation between them. From the biblical perspective, the world that we experience and know as human beings, as well as our very existence, is only possible because God sustains reality.⁹

The significance of both the breath and water metaphors springs from the absolute necessity of air and water for life. Human bodies consist primarily of water. Water and air are not only in our environment, they must be within us, and their elements are found in every cell of our bodies. When we have deficient amounts of air and water, or if we take in toxic rather than pure air and water, we become ill, and may die from the deficiencies or the toxins. So, too, many biblical texts warn that if we turn from God as the source of living water and dig out “cracked cisterns” for ourselves “that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13), we risk spiritual illness and death.

The significance of water and breath metaphors for the thesis of this chapter is that they point to both the intimacy and the *necessity* of the Spirit’s involvement in our lives, for the sake of our very existence, whether we know it or not. The narratives and

⁹ Footnote

metaphors that point to God as the One who gives and sustains life carry deep theological implications. Moltmann points out that if our theology is grounded “on an understanding of the Spirit of God as the power of creation and the wellspring of life,” we then open up “the possibility of perceiving God in all things, and all things in God.”¹⁰

God as the source of freedom. A second critical role enacted by the Spirit of God in scripture is to provide freedom. The biblical paradigm for freedom from oppression is the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. We are told that God has “heard their cry on account of their taskmasters” and knows their suffering (Exod. 3:7). It is because of this that God determines to deliver them from Egypt and take them to the promised land, “to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8). The Exodus paradigm is of particular importance in liberation theologies in many parts of the world.¹¹ It reveals that God, not wanting God’s people to suffer and live in misery, works within history to secure their freedom.

As significant as the exodus story is for both Jewish and Christian faith, it is not without problems. At the end of the sentence that characterizes the promised land as flowing with milk and honey, we learn that the land is “the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Exod. 3:8). As we learn from the book of Joshua, the Canaanites, Hittites, and others do not welcome the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Moltmann, Spirit of Life, 35.

¹¹ See for example, James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 20th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990). See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, rev. ed., trans. and eds., Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 86-91; We Drink from Our Own Wells, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 74-75; Dwight N. Hopkins, Shoes that Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 23-27.

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loss of their land, and the Israelites take it by force. Although many liberation theologians have not addressed this issue, womanist theologian Delores Williams emphasizes its importance. She challenges black liberation theologians to avoid an uncritical use of the biblical exodus event.¹²

The problem is this: If YHWH is a universal God, if all children are the children of God, and if God can be characterized accurately as the One who seeks freedom for all, then God must be concerned for the people of the land of Canaan. When God makes the covenant with Abraham, God tells Abraham that he will be the father of a mighty nation, “and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (Gen. 18:18). Killing the people who live in Canaan and taking their land is hardly a blessing. It is at just such points that the plurality of theological perspectives in the Bible requires very careful and focused consideration.

Given the centrality of the land of Israel to those of Jewish faith and the importance of the Exodus paradigm as a source of hope for many oppressed people throughout the world, we must emphasize the significance of God’s response to the suffering of the Hebrew slaves while rejecting the conquest theology that attributes the death of the people of Canaan to God’s plan. Is not the land God provides sufficiently spacious for their co-existence?

It is significant that although many oppressed peoples have found the Exodus narrative to be a narrative of hope, Native Americans often find it troubling. In their

¹² Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 150-51. In addition to this point, Williams also encourages black liberation theologians to build contemporary systematic

history, the people seeking liberation from oppressive forces in Europe saw the land that is now known as the United States as the promised land flowing with milk and honey. The Native Americans who had already been living on the land for thousands of years before it was “discovered” found themselves cast in the role of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Their lives, cultures, and the land they revered were decimated, not just at the beginning of European colonization, but throughout the last five hundred years. The Native Americans who survived were moved from place to place as the dominant culture discovered unrecognized value in land once given to them and took it back for their own economic gain. As Ernest Lee Tuveson points out, the early colonizers’ self-understanding – that they were the chosen people of God who were going to make a great nation that would redeem the world – was used as justification for destroying people and cultures that were an obstacle to their “manifest destiny.”¹³

Although the contradiction at the heart of the liberation paradigm is left without comment in the biblical text, the deeper theological issue at stake – whether the God worshipped by the Hebrew people is the universal God with dominion over all of creation or only the God of the Hebrews – is addressed in other biblical texts. There are many voices that attest to the conception of YHWH as the God of “universal justice,

theology by pushing their theological imaginations beyond the exodus paradigm and Jesus’ words in Luke 4 in awareness of the changing historical reality of the black community since slavery.

¹³ Ernest Lee Tuveson, Redeemer Nation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

righteousness, peace, and salvation,” although these voices are not systematized within the Bible.¹⁴

In Psalm 82, YHWH is described as taking his place at the council of the gods. The psalm employs the genre of accusation, presupposing a polytheistic trial in heaven. YHWH takes on the role of the chief justice.¹⁵ The evidence for the accusation against the gods present at the council is their ongoing “unjust judgment,” “partiality to the wicked” (82:2) and their failure to attend to the “weak and the needy” (82:4). At the end of the psalm, YHWH is called to rise up and judge “the earth; for all the nations belong to you!” (82:8). The justification for YHWH’s advancement over the other gods is YHWH’s universal concern for justice and righteousness.¹⁶

Psalms 96 and 33 also proclaim the universality of YHWH’s concerns and dominion. Psalm 96 proclaims that YHWH “is to be revered above all gods” (96:4) and that YHWH will come to “judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (96:13). Psalm 33 extols YHWH as the creator (33:6-7) and testifies that YHWH “loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord” (33:5). “The Lord looks down from heaven. . . [and] sees all humankind” (33:13).¹⁷

¹⁴ Knierim, *Task of Old Testament Theology*, 319.

¹⁵ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 156.

¹⁶ Knierim, *Task of Old Testament Theology*, 319; Kraus, 155-58.

¹⁷ YHWH’s concern for those other than the Israelites is also addressed within the Talmud. For example, when the Red Sea is parted so the Hebrew people might escape from Egypt, it is said that when the sea closed over the Egyptian soldiers, drowning them, the angels in heaven wanted to sing for joy. The rabbis point out that God “rebuked them saying: My Handiwork [the Egyptians] is drowning in the sea; would ye utter song before me!” Isidore Epstein, ed. *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 12., trans. Jacob Shachter (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 3:251.

The theology that drives the story of Jonah points to God's universal concerns in disclosing God's mercy toward the people of Nineveh, one of the great cities of Mesopotamia. Jonah tries desperately to avoid God's command that he go to Nineveh to proclaim God's awareness of their wickedness. He is not shocked when God forgives them after they repent. In fact, he says that is precisely the reason he did not want to go in the first place. He did not think God would punish the people of Nineveh as Jonah thought they deserved because he knew God to be "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2).

After Nineveh is saved, Jonah is angry at God and asks to die. God comforts him by making a bush grow up in the hot sun to give him comfort. When the bush dies, Jonah is again so angry he says he wants to die. God responds to Jonah,

You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (4:10-11).

The explicit expression of YHWH's concern for the lives of both the people and the animals of Nineveh is notable.

Of particular importance in emphasizing God's role as the universal source of life and freedom is the theology of the Yahwist whose writing follows the conquest of Canaan but is before the time of the prophets. For the Yahwist, YHWH is a "blessing for humankind."¹⁸ In contrast to the story of the conquest, the Yahwist writes about

¹⁸ Knierim, Task of Old Testament Theology, 320.

peaceful coexistence with the inhabitants of the land as sojourners in Yahweh's land (Lev 25:23). Moreover, the people with whom the patriarchs come into contact are blessed: Abraham intercedes for Sodom (!) (Genesis 18) and for the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites (Gen 19:37f.); Lot (Edom!) is offered the choice of land by Abraham (Genesis 13); Abimelech the 'Philistine' and Issac make a 'covenant' and coexist in 'peace' (Gen 26:28-31); the Aramean/Syrian Laban says to Jacob, '. . . I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you' (Gen 30:27); Jacob and Esau are reconciled (Gen 33:1f.); and Egypt is blessed for Joseph's sake (Gen 41: 49, 57). The patriarchs in the land, and all with and around them, are blessed: Moab, Ammon, Edom, Aram, Philistia, Egypt, and the Hittites in Hebron (Genesis 23).¹⁹

In terms of biblical theology, the God who is worshipped by Christians and Jews is affirmed not as the God of a few but as the God who has dominion over and steadfast love for all people and all creation. Knierim points out that if YHWH is

not in principle and before everything else the God of all reality, he cannot be the one and only God because he is not God universal. Yahweh may be Israel's God in oneness and exclusivity, but if he is not Israel's God because he is first of all God of all reality and all humanity, he is a nationalistic deity or an individualistic idol, one among others, actually a no-god. Without the critical notion of universality, the affirmation of Yahweh's oneness and exclusivity does not substantiate the affirmation of his true deity. This affirmation is substantiated only when Yahweh is perceived as the God of universal reality. The notion of universal reality which is basically reflected in the notions of Yahweh's creation of and dominion over heaven and earth is therefore the criterion for the Old Testament's affirmation of Yahweh the universal God, and for his true deity. It is the only persuasive argument for the significance of monotheism. . . . This horizon represents the most fundamental of all theological aspects in the Old Testament. It is most fundamental because it constitutes at once the ultimate criterion for Yahweh's deity and for the dimension of his dominion. No other theological notion can compete with it. In fact, all others are relative to it. They receive their validity from it.²⁰

¹⁹ Knierim, Task of Old Testament Theology, 320. Knierim also refers to H. W. Wolff, "Das Kerygma des Jahwisten," Evangelische Theologie 24 (1964); 73-98; reprinted in Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament, Theologische Bücherei 22 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), 345-73.

²⁰ Rolf Knierim, "The Task of Old Testament Theology," in The Flowering of Old Testament Theology, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 479. I quote Knierim's position at length because within this passage he exemplifies a way for dealing with the plurality of theological perspectives in the Bible using the Bible's own criteria to evaluate the relationships among competing perspectives. This approach pushes Christians to become

Emphasis on YHWH as the God of all creation and all people does not minimize the significance of God's calling out the Hebrew people as God's chosen people to whom a special mission and place is given. At the same time, this chosenness does not restrict God from embracing all within God's passionate love and vision for justice and righteousness. This understanding is, of course, reflected in Judaism.

Biblical understandings of freedom involve not only political freedom, but physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom as well. The Old Testament includes stories of people being healed and brought back from death. Abraham prays for Abimelech and his wife and they are healed (Gen. 20:17). Elijah revives the widow's son (1 Kings 17:18-22). Naaman finally agrees to follow Elisha's directives and is healed of leprosy (2 Kings 5:8-14).

conscious of the biblical texts they favor over others and the implicit criteria they apply. Privileging of some texts over others occurs regardless of one's understanding of revelation and the authority of the Bible. Knierim calls us to be accountable for making our implicit criteria explicit. He offers a way to work with criteria drawn from the biblical texts themselves as part of the exegetical and hermeneutic process.

The need to address the Bible as a whole is critical in establishing respect for the authority of the Bible. The ability to use the Bible's own criteria to establish the priorities among the competing theological perspectives in the Bible also increases our ability to engage in more constructive discussion with those for whom the Bible is the only acceptable authority. If we consider the various theological perspectives in the Bible in relationship to God's universal dominion in justice and righteousness, then it is possible to use the Bible's own most inclusive understanding of God as the basis for the critique of texts in which God's justice and righteousness are subordinated to other interests within the community the writer and/or redactor represent.

One of the reasons Christianity lacks credibility for many people in the modern world is that while Christians claim that God is a God of love, they are unable to offer ways of discussing texts that portray God as violent and destructive. A particularly common way of handling the problem, unfortunately, has been to set the God of the Old Testament off against the God of the New Testament, the former being the God of wrath, and the latter being the God of love. This flattening of the complex terrain of the Old Testament by Christians is not only inaccurate, it does violence to the Bible, Judaism, and Christianity, as well. Knierim's approach to biblical theology offers a responsible way to call into question the theological adequacy of texts in any part of the Bible, such as those Phyllis Trible aptly describes as "texts of terror," that violate the theology of the universal dominion of God in justice and righteousness. Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

The theme of physical healing is a particular emphasis in the New Testament. We are told that God works through Jesus to heal demoniacs, the blind, lame, and deaf. Jesus heals the centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5-13), brings the daughter of a leader of the synagogue back to life (Matt. 9:18-25), and calls Lazarus to rise from his tomb three days after he died (John 11). Freeing people from the physical and mental sufferings of life is so significant in the New Testament that of the 3779 verses in the four gospels, 727 relate specifically to healing and another 31 verses refer to miracles that include healings.²¹

The Bible tells of God's role in freeing people from political oppression, physical illness, mental illness, ostracism from the community, hunger, and spiritual wandering. In all the work that God does, God not only frees people *from* the chains that bind them, God frees people *for* life in right relationship with God and with one's neighbor. God calls us out of our self-preoccupation to care for the orphan, the widow, those who are poor and hungry, the sick, the outcast, those who are in prison, and those who are enslaved, by whatever means. God's immanence within human life is revealed in Jesus' words that whatever we do to those who are seen as "least" in the eyes of society, we do to him (Matt. 25:40). God's immanence in Jesus Christ discloses that God takes the suffering and violence of the world into God's own self, thus revealing God's vulnerability to the pain and suffering of the world.

For Christians, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection embody the promise that because of Jesus Christ we are free, as Paul emphasizes.²² We are freed from the endless

²¹ Morton T. Kelsey, Psychology, Medicine, and Christian Healing (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 42.

²² See, for example, Romans 8 and Galatians 3-5.

pressure to justify ourselves—to others, to ourselves, to God. We can claim our inherent value as beloved children of God and live into our vocation of discipleship, which in diverse ways and places calls us into partnership with God on behalf of God's world. The metaphor that discloses the real possibility of freedom and newness of life is the metaphor of birth and rebirth. The fourth gospel uses the language of believers being born of the Spirit (John 3:4). Paul emphasizes maternal imagery as he speaks of the labor pains he suffers a second time as he now waits for Christ to be formed in them (Gal. 4:19). The power of birth imagery is its unambiguous affirmation of the possibility of new life and an open future.

Throughout the diverse biblical traditions, the worldview embodied in the Bible is one in which God is very much engaged in and concerned about the world. God's immanence, as well as God's transcendence, is affirmed in many different ways.

Immanence of God in Theology

Prior to the Enlightenment, it was common to find theologians affirming the immanence of God. As an example, Calvin argues that God is very much involved in the world. He claims that faith must go deeper than acknowledging God as the initial Creator. "We must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception."²³ For Calvin, God "sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the

²³ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), ~~vol.~~ 1:197.

least sparrow [cf. Matt.10:29].”²⁴ He refers to God as the “fountain of every good.”²⁵

Calvin’s life (1509-1564) predates the influence of René Descartes (1596-1650), Robert Boyle (1627-1691), and Issac Newton (1642-1727), who helped solidify the perception that we live in a mechanistic universe in which matter is understood to be totally inert.²⁶ Particularly for Boyle and Newton, the affirmation of a mechanistic worldview was important, in part, because they believed it supported faith in a transcendent deity who could intervene periodically, which was a conviction they sought to sustain.

The mechanistic worldview was well established by the time of John Wesley (1703-1791), yet he refused to conform his theology to the reigning perspective. He argued for the immanence of God, claiming that the Spirit is within us and sustains us. Because of the suspicion surrounding “enthusiastists,” Wesley had to fight the accusation that he embraced “enthusiasm.” Despite this confusion, however, Wesley was adamant that we must not reject the Bible’s claim that the work of the Spirit occurs within us. As John Cobb says: “To succumb to the purely rationalistic and objective understanding of faith and justification was, for Wesley, to lose the heart of the gospel and the religion of the heart.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 199.

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ These founders of the early modern worldview emphasized that matter is totally inert. Boyle and Newton used this conception of matter to shore up support for a transcendent deity. Eventually belief in the transcendent deity was rejected and we were left with a theory of materialism that continued to characterize matter as inert. See Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, 12-13.

²⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 46.

The charge that Wesley embraced enthusiasm was supported by the fact that some of the people who heard him did have ecstatic experiences. However, there was a significant theological difference between the enthusiasts' and Wesley's understanding of the Holy Spirit. The enthusiasts thought that the Holy Spirit was something external to a human being. They did not conceive of human existence as dependent on the Holy Spirit. In contrast, Wesley understood the Spirit to be "the principle of life itself, of all understanding, of what is called conscience, and of every impulse to good."²⁸ While individuals may have extraordinary experiences through the action of the Spirit, such experiences may have other causes. If we focus on the extraordinary experiences, Wesley thought, our attention would be drawn away from the true Spirit. Jürgen Moltmann affirms the value of Wesley's emphasis on the immanence of the Spirit and agrees with Wesley's claim that separating things from God is in effect "practical atheism."²⁹

The significance of Wesley's refusal to affirm the mechanistic worldview is clearer when we consider the long-term consequences of belief in a God that stands outside of a machine-like universe. This belief was read back into the Bible and provided the picture of God for most Westerners for the last two hundred years. Cobb says:

[I]t is *that* [original emphasis] God who has aroused so much incredulity and antipathy in the past century. Wesley's God, the Soul of the world, who pervades and actuates the whole creation, and who enlivens, enlightens, and liberates all people, calling them to strive toward personal and social perfection, and empowering their efforts—that is a different matter.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 46.

²⁹ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 317.

³⁰ Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 51.

Cobb points out that there are aspects of Wesley's theology that have to be modified and, in some cases, rejected. Nevertheless, Wesley's insights, including aspects of his doctrine of God, have a strong biblical base and can be appropriated in ways that will contribute to theological discourse and to the lives of Christians who seek to deepen the vitality of their faith.

At about the same time that Wesley in Britain was affirming the immanence of the Spirit, American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was also affirming the indwelling of the Spirit in the world. According to theologian and Edwards' scholar Sang Hyun Lee, for Edwards

the created existence is the exertion of God's own dispositional essence. Therefore, what happens in time and space is really and internally related to God's own life---not in the sense of adding anything to God's being ad intra but rather in the sense of constituting the external extension of God's internal fullness. In this limited and yet real sense, the created world affects God's own being.³¹

Lee points to the important role human beings play in the process of actualizing God's creation, according to Edwards. In Lee's words

[t]hrough the regenerate person's apprehension of material things as images of God's beauty, they are not just known but actualized. Speaking of the world as 'the expression' of God's being, Edwards writes: 'The very being of the expression depends on the perception of created understandings. And so much the more as the expression is known, so much the more it is.'³²

From Edwards' perspective, human beings have a profound responsibility in relationship to nature. Lee explains that the demands of this responsibility require

³¹ Sang Hyun Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 209.

³² Sang Hyun Lee, "Jonathan Edwards on Nature," in Faithful Imagining, eds. Sang Hung Lee, Wayne Proudfoot, and Albert Blackwell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 52. The Edwards quote is from

nothing less than “the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for human minds to apprehend the wider meanings of things. Only sanctified minds with their widened imagination are able to experience things ‘in their true relations and respects to other things, and to things in general.’”³³

Lee contends that for Edwards, if the human imagination is not widened, “human beings do not ‘consent to being’ but fall into a narrow or deformed perspective on reality.”³⁴ Edwards considered such a narrowness of imagination to be sin. He believed such sin has a negative effect on nature. Nature was created to be a shadow or image of divine beauty. Thus, nature helps human beings to fulfill their God-given purpose because it helps human beings to know and love God. For Edwards the interdependence of nature and humanity is of profound theological significance.

Interpreters working from the late modern worldview would reduce Edwards’ reflections on God, nature, and humanity to poetic or mythological musings, at best. However, constructive postmodern theologians can read Edwards with an openness to the significance of Edwards’ emphasis on both experiencing God through the affections and respecting the essential involvement of a rigorous intellectual judgment that allows one to test the fruits of experience to see if they are indeed of God,³⁵ his reverence for nature,

“Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 8, Ethical Writings, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 432.

³³ Lee, Faithful Imagining, 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵ See especially Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

his insights into the immanence of the transcendent God,³⁶ and his development of a dispositional ontology as a result of his rejection of the substance ontology of Aristotle.³⁷ Lee maintains that Edwards' theology makes a valuable contribution to an "ecologically responsible theology of nature."³⁸

Despite the significance of Edwards's and Calvin's insights, it is important to address their understanding of God's omnipotent power. Calvin ascribes total control of every good and disastrous event that occurs in the world to God, claiming that all events are in accord with "God's secret plan."³⁹ For Edwards, too, it is clear that God's power in determining what occurs is dominant. There are growing numbers of theologians who reject the concept of God's omnipotent power and emphasize God's vulnerability. In contrast to the doctrine of God's impassability, imported from Greek philosophy, which assured God's omnipotence, theologians are emphasizing God's suffering.⁴⁰

³⁶ One of the unfortunate realities of survey courses in American literature is that almost any person who has taken such a course was introduced to Jonathan Edwards, but the one piece they are most likely to have read and remembered is his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Delivered on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut at the height of the Great Awakening, this sermon describes the eternal torments of hell that await the degenerate sinner in the hands of a merciless God. Through his intense and fiery imagery, Edwards hoped to shake church members from the lethargy that was fed by their confidence that membership in the visible church ensured that they were also regenerated children of God. See Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in The American Tradition in Literature, eds. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 109-124. Students often find Edwards' portrayal of God not so much threatening as disgusting. It is an introduction to Edwards that may discourage them from explorations into his rich insights about beauty, nature, imagination, and religious experience. These aspects of Edwards' theology deserve renewed attention. See Sang Hyun Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

³⁷ Sang Hyun Lee, Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 34-114; and "Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology," in Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion, eds. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 15-44.

³⁸ Lee, Faithful Imagining, 59.

³⁹ Calvin, Institutes, 199 (XVI.2).

⁴⁰ William C. Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 6.

The theme of God's suffering is found in process theologians from Whitehead on, with special emphasis given to the issue of God's power in the work of David Ray Griffin.⁴¹ One also finds a rejection of omnipotent power in Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Jungel, in Asian theology, in Latin American liberation thought, and in feminist theology. While noting historical reasons for this trend, William Placher argues that the deeper source of the stress on a vulnerable God springs from "Christian theologians . . . reclaiming their own birthright, for it is just such a God that is encountered in the biblical narratives."⁴²

Throughout Narratives of a Vulnerable God, Placher wrestles with the contradictions found in biblical texts and makes a compelling case for his thesis:

God suffers because God is vulnerable, and God is vulnerable because God loves—and it is love, not suffering or even vulnerability, that is finally the point. God can help because God acts out of love, and love risks suffering. A God defined in terms of power is precisely not a reliable rescuer, because power provides no guarantee of concern, and power, in the way most cultures have most often used the word, too often grows out of a fear of vulnerability that makes really reaching out in love, with all the risks entailed, impossible.⁴³

Although I reject Calvin's attribution of omnipotent power to God and Edwards' emphasis on God's overriding control, I want to lift up their insistence that the transcendent God is also immanent and is intimately involved in sustaining and caring for all of creation, including human beings. Their conception of God's power is not a necessary consequence of emphasizing God's immanence.

⁴¹ David Ray Griffin, God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976; reprint with a new preface, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990); Evil Revisited (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁴² Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

Despite the growing strength of the scientific worldview during the time of Wesley and Edwards, the biblical worldview, including belief in the immanence of the transcendent God, remained viable in the public mind. In the late modern period in which we now live, the scientific worldview has a much stronger hold on the public imagination. Theologians, therefore, must now address the challenges posed by the scientific worldview.

Worldview

Christianity is deeply rooted in the biblical worldview. For centuries prior to the Enlightenment, the biblical view of the world as created was dominant in the West, thus supporting and strengthening the Christian perception of reality. This premodern worldview interprets the world, including human beings, as being real and important in and of themselves because their reality and value are derived from God. Late modern thinkers do not support this worldview.

Cobb defines “vision of reality,” an important technical term in his theology, as “the precritical, preconscious structuring of the experienced world. . . . [T]his structuring is influenced by critical and conscious beliefs and in turn influences them, but . . . it functions much more widely than these beliefs.”⁴⁴ We each have a vision of reality – a faith in terms of which we live – that functions at a preconscious level to order and interpret the data we experience. Cobb argues that “life is impossible without some meaningful, primal organization of the stimuli that affect the physical organism. This

⁴⁴ Cobb, God and the World, 136.

organization must be both perceptual and valuational, and in human beings it is always linguistic and therefore implicitly conceptual.”⁴⁵

Cobb’s concept of vision of reality, which functions at a preconscious level, influences our worldview. Clifford Geertz defines the worldview of a particular culture as “their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.”⁴⁶ Our worldview, which emerges from the family, friends, and community or communities that are of particular significance to us, constitutes what we believe to be true about the nature and meaning of existence.

We rarely reflect on the presuppositions of our worldview; we simply assume them to be true. People may not even realize that they have a worldview – a faith – at all in this sense. We tend not to realize that our worldview is conditioned by our particular history. As a result, Cobb points out, people claim that “reality simply is the way they perceive it to be, as if anyone who did not agree were blind, ignorant, or stupid. This leads to rationalistic dogmatism, which is as much to be avoided as is ecclesiastical authoritarianism.”⁴⁷

The worldview generally held within a culture is influenced by the intellectual climate of the time. Prior to the Enlightenment, the biblical worldview was deeply ingrained in cultures within the West. With the challenges posed by thinkers such as René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, however, the intellectual world

⁴⁵ Cobb, Christ in a Pluralistic Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 90.

⁴⁶ Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

began to move more fully into modernity. As the philosophical and scientific theories that developed along the trajectory set by Hume and related thinkers began to dominate the intellectual climate of the West, support for the plausibility structures that sustained a biblical worldview began to erode.⁴⁸

When the biblical worldview was deeply ingrained in culture, it helped inform the notions of common sense in the culture. As the vitality of the biblical worldview diminished, common sense became saturated with the thinking of modern philosophy and science. Although there is a lag time between the insights of influential philosophers and scientists and the dissemination of their worldview into the public mind, Cobb believes that changes in philosophical understandings, such as those ushered in by Hume, eventually have a pervasive influence on the sensibility of a culture and should, therefore, be of concern to Christian thinkers.

Late Modern Worldview

In the United States, the late modern worldview that permeates our culture presses toward a complete relativism, which is antithetical to Christian presuppositions about truth and reality. As I pointed out in chapter one, many deconstructive postmodern thinkers, in moving beyond what they see to be the errors of modernity, advocate a severe relativism that often fades into nihilism. This form of postmodern thinking is challenged by Cobb, although he agrees that there are aspects of modernity that can and should be challenged. I explain his alternative to the late modern worldview – a *constructive* postmodern worldview – following the discussion of the late modern worldview.

⁴⁸ Cobb, God and the World, 131.

Presuppositions of the Late Modern Worldview

The presuppositions of the late modern worldview are embodied in its reigning philosophy – determinism. Determinism assumes that the present can be fully explained by antecedent conditions, if all the relevant data are available. As I discuss later in this chapter, determinism has a long history in science and is supported by influential contemporary philosophers, despite its rejection of human freedom.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am focusing on three particularly critical presuppositions of the late modern worldview. The first presupposition is that the fundamental elements of reality are enduring substances – what one might think of as microscopic billiard balls. The second is that perception is limited to the senses. This second assumption leads to an epistemology that privileges sense data as the legitimate evidence for what counts as reality. The third presupposition, that reality is equated with the objects of sense experience, particularly sight and touch, feeds the commonsense notion that the world of sense data and the world of material things constitute what is real.

These three presuppositions are mutually reinforcing and support the philosophy of determinism as the most adequate explanation of reality. In challenging the late modern worldview, Cobb, building on the insights of Whitehead, rejects all three presuppositions. Before turning to Cobb's analysis, it is important to spell out more fully what determinism is and what the implications are of accepting it as the most adequate explanation of reality.

Determinism as a Scientific Worldview

The rejection of the sacred by science and philosophy has paralleled a growing public confidence in – and allegiance to – science, thus making the views of science important for theological reflection. Cobb explains that in contemporary scientific and philosophical thinking, “the present and future are viewed systematically as outgrowths of the settled past.”⁴⁹ Confidence in the explanatory power of antecedent conditions – whether biological, psychological, and/or sociological – leads to mechanistic models that presuppose a complete determinism. When determinism is qualified, it is qualified in terms of chance, not freedom. Complex multivariate statistical models allow scientists to take into account a vast range of variables, thus increasing the extent to which phenomena can be explained, predicted with a high degree of probability, and in many cases, controlled.

The fundamental commitment to a deterministic worldview has deep historical roots in science. Confidence in determinism was clear in the work of Charles Darwin. David Griffin points out that for Darwin, “‘caprice’ in the world would make science impossible, so that both divine and free human activity had to be eliminated from our worldview.”⁵⁰ Philosopher John Searle adds to the picture of scientific confidence in determinism by noting the image articulated by Laplace.⁵¹ In Searle’s words, Laplace believed that “[i]f an ideal observer knew all the laws governing their movements, he

⁴⁹ Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 48.

⁵⁰ David Ray Griffin, “Introduction: The Reenchantment of Science,” in The Reenchantment of Science, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 3.

⁵¹ The Marquis de Laplace was the title given to a French mathematician and astronomer, Pierre Simon (1749-1827).

could predict and retrodict the entire history of the universe. Some of the predictions of a contemporary quantum-mechanical Laplace might be statistical, but they would still allow no room for freedom of the will.”⁵²

Contemporary scientists who espouse determinism are supported by contemporary philosophers who reject the possibility of human freedom philosophically, even when they acknowledge that human beings inevitably presuppose freedom in practice. Searle acknowledges the contradiction. He admits that while he could never be convinced that he himself does not have freedom, the philosophical position he espouses excludes the possibility of human freedom.⁵³

The philosophical debate over free will vs. determinism is deeply embedded in our assumptions about the nature of minds, bodies – particularly brains – and the relationship between them. Following Descartes, many philosophers have held that something can be either mental or physical, but not both, thus leading to the conclusion that the mind and body are different in kind. Descartes conceived of physical reality, including animals, as composed of inert matter that functions mechanistically. He believed only human beings have minds and are thus capable of thoughts and feelings.⁵⁴ Cartesian mind-body dualism has spawned centuries of debate over how the mind and body could be different in kind and yet interact with one another. Despite strenuous

⁵² John Searle, Minds, Brains, and Science (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁴ Descartes explained his mechanistic understanding of animals explicitly. He argued that they feel no pain. When they cry out or shriek, their sounds should be interpreted in the same way one would interpret the creaky noises of a machine that needs to be oiled. Despite commonsense rejection of such a view, our economic orientation flows from Descartes' perspective. Animals are resources whose value is established in economic terms. For a theological analysis of this issue, see John B. Cobb, Jr., Matters of Life and Death (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 19-43.

effort, the dominant philosophical schools of thought have been unable to offer an adequate solution to the mind-body problem.⁵⁵ Inability to resolve the problem strengthens the philosophical arguments for determinism.

In working through the philosophical dilemma posed by the mind-body relationship, Griffin identifies five presuppositions that lead to determinism, which excludes human freedom. These presuppositions overlap and extend beyond the three presupposition of the late modern worldview identified above. I list them here in full because they demonstrate the tight logical connection between determinism in the natural sciences and the denial of human freedom. Most scientists trained in institutions steeped in the orthodoxy of late modernity agree with these presuppositions when they are articulated.

1. The behavior of physical entities, such as atoms and molecules, is entirely determined by the laws of physics and chemistry and is therefore fully deterministic. (Even if there be ontological [not merely epistemic] indeterminacy with regard to individuals at the quantum level, it is canceled out in aggregations of such individuals by the 'law of large numbers.')
2. The human body is composed entirely of atoms and their sub-atomic constituents.
3. There is no 'mind' distinct from the brain.
4. Even if (*per impossibile*) there were a mind distinct from the brain, it would not be capable of self-determining freedom. (This would be complete epiphenomenalism.)
5. Even if (*per impossibile*) there were a distinct mind capable of self-determining freedom, it would be capable of determining only some of its own

⁵⁵ The great frustration of philosophers over the intractability of the mind-body problem is leading at least some philosophers to question the fundamental concepts and presuppositions in terms of which they have viewed reality. Whitehead's panexperientialist ontology offers ways of resolving the problems that have seemed heretofore incapable of resolution. For a detailed analysis of the history of the mind-body problem in philosophy, the various contemporary positions on the problem, and the breakthrough that is possible utilizing the insights of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, see Griffin, Unsnarling the World-Knot.

states, not those of the body. (This would be partial epiphenomenalism.) The reasons for this conclusion are the following.

- a. Being different in kind from physical matter, such a mind would not be able causally to affect it.
- b. Even if the problem created by principle 5a could be avoided by reconceiving mind and/or matter so as to affirm a nondualistic interactionism, such interaction would violate the law of the conservation of energy.
- c. Even if the problem created by Principle 5b could be solved by enlarging the notion of 'energy' so as to include the mind with its 'psychic energy' as part of the closed system of nature within which energy is conserved, there would still be the fact, enunciated in principle 1, that atoms and subatomic particles within the body obey the same physical and chemical laws as they would outside the body, so that their behavior could not be partly determined by a mind. If there were a 'ghost in the machine,' it would, like all ghosts, be impotent.⁵⁶

What scientists often do not realize, however, is that acceptance of these presuppositions necessarily leads to the conclusion that human behavior, including the scientist's own behavior, is fully determined. Unlike philosophers who wrestle directly with the issue of human freedom, many scientists have never thought through the implications of the presuppositions of their scientific worldview in terms of freedom.⁵⁷ Whitehead insisted that hard-core commonsense notions – notions that all human beings inevitably presuppose in practice even if they deny them verbally – are the ultimate criteria in terms of which we must assess the adequacy of theory.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, 166-67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170-71.

⁵⁸ Although Whitehead is not usually thought of as a commonsense philosopher, in a significant sense the label is appropriate. Griffin points out that to clarify Whitehead's meaning, one must differentiate between the soft-core commonsense notions held by society, which are often proven wrong by science (such as the notion that the sun circles the earth), and hard-core commonsense notions, such as freedom and causal relations, which all humans inevitably presuppose in practice and must, in fact, presuppose even in the act of denying them verbally, thus leading to self-contradiction, a fundamental violation of reason. Our list of hard-core commonsense notions is fallible, as is our verbal expressions of them. Therefore, they are open to challenge. However, if they are not refuted – that is, if no exceptions to them being presupposed in practice can be found -- they should serve as criteria to help us assess the adequacy of theory. Griffin

Failure to recognize and apply these criteria contributes to the strength of determinism as the dominant theory in the natural sciences, which increases confidence in determinism in the human sciences.⁵⁹ Searle reinforces the point:

[S]ince nature consists of particles and their relations with each other, and since everything can be accounted for in terms of those particles and their relations, there is simply no room for freedom of the will. As far as human freedom is concerned, it doesn't matter whether physics is deterministic, as Newtonian physics was, or whether it allows for an indeterminacy at the level of particle physics, as contemporary quantum mechanics does. Indeterminism at the level of particles in physics is really no support at all to any doctrine of the freedom of the will. . . . [I]t really does look as if everything we know about physics forces us to some form of denial of human freedom.⁶⁰

Scientists and philosophers wedded to materialism, the dominant philosophical perspective of the late modern worldview, reject without qualification the thesis of this chapter – that the immanence of the transcendent God is a vital reality that sustains the world and makes it possible for us to escape biological, psychological, and sociological determinism. If God is nothing but a human concept – not an actual influence in reality – and if the only variables influencing us are those identified by the natural and human sciences, a growing body of research data makes it reasonable to conclude that our lives

argues that acceptance of these hard-core commonsense notions is not an example of foundationalism. They do not function as basic beliefs on which all other beliefs are to be constructed. Rather, they are criteria that serve as a compass to help us assess the adequacy of the direction we are headed in the process of theory-construction. If a theory leads inevitably to the denial of freedom, a hard-core commonsense notion, as determinism does, then we should reject the theory as an inadequate explanation of reality. Griffin, Unsnarling the World-Knot, 21.

⁵⁹ B. F. Skinner's radical behaviorist perspective is an example of a deterministic theory in psychology that continues to be influential. Skinner argued that human behavior is the result of physiology and reinforcement from the factors in one's environment. He described the notion of the human mind as a metaphor that has taken on a reality that impedes our scientific and political efforts to deal successfully with pressing problems of human society. For him the key to promoting constructive human behavior lies in the environment, not within the individual. He explained apparent evidence of creativity as the result of random chance that was then reinforced by environmental contingencies. B. F. Skinner, About Behaviorism (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 126-31, 182-83.

⁶⁰ Searle, Minds, Brains, and Science, 86-87.

are best explained by some combination of biology and the contingencies in our environment.⁶¹

The implications of accepting a fully deterministic worldview are profound. Griffin summarizes the consequences: there is no role for “purposes, values, ideals, possibilities, and qualities, and there is no freedom, creativity, temporality, or divinity. There are no norms, not even truth, and everything is ultimately meaningless.”⁶² The issues that are at stake in this debate could not be more important for practical theologians, thus making our involvement in the debate crucial.

A Constructive Postmodern Worldview

As a Christian theologian, Cobb is deeply concerned about the ways in which the late modern worldview is permeating the worldview held by people in the United States. If a deterministic worldview with its presuppositions about the nature of existence is incorporated into our worldview, there are no inherent reasons not to use others and nature for our own purposes, a perspective that is antithetical to Christian beliefs.⁶³

Despite the fact that many scientists and philosophers who affirm the late modern worldview are ethical, compassionate people, their worldview in and of itself provides no good reasons to affirm the inherent value of creatures, nature, or even each human life. Within the context of such a worldview, it would be meaningless to encourage human

⁶¹ For a discussion of the movement toward a biological and sociological determinism within psychiatry, see Robert Coles, Secular Mind, 153-89. In biology see, for example, Richard Dawkins, Unweaving the Rainbow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

⁶² Griffin, Reenchantment of Science, 3.

⁶³ John B. Cobb, Jr., The Earthist Challenge to Economism (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 181.

beings to develop the spiritual disciplines that would assist them in discerning how to live in ways that are attuned more fully to what the Spirit is doing in the world, both in nature and in the lives of people.

Through his critical appropriation of the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Cobb argues for an alternative worldview that rejects determinism and supports arguments for the inherent value of nature, creatures, and each human being, commitments that Cobb is called to by his Christian faith. The worldview Cobb appropriates from Whitehead allows him to challenge the late modern worldview with its destructive trajectories on scientific and philosophical grounds. At the same time, it allows him to affirm Christian doctrines and his faith in the ontological reality of God. Cobb argues that although Christian life begins in faith and confession, its vitality cannot long endure if there is no worldview to support it.⁶⁴ Cobb's constructive postmodern theology offers such a worldview.⁶⁵

Challenging the Assumptions of Modernity

In developing a constructive postmodern worldview, Cobb, building on Whitehead, challenges the presuppositions of the late modern worldview identified above. By challenging the assumptions (1) that the fundamental elements of reality are enduring substances, (2) that human perception is limited to sense perception, and (3) that reality is equated with sense data and material things, Whitehead provides a scientifically

⁶⁴ Cobb, Earthist Challenge, 182-83; "Christian Mission and the Role of Worship," New World Outlook 62 (April 1972), 187-92.

⁶⁵ Cobb first used the term "post-modern" in 1964. See "From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World." The article was also reprinted in several books in the 1970s. Cobb also uses the term "post-modern" in Christ in a Pluralistic Age, 25ff, 70, 122, 244.

defensible and philosophically intelligible worldview that rejects determinism and affirms human freedom and the reality of God.⁶⁶

Rejection of enduring substances. In describing the fundamental nature of reality, Whitehead rejected the presupposition that the fundamental elements of reality are substances in Descartes' sense of the term "substance," namely, that which "can exist by itself, that is without the aid of any other substance."⁶⁷ In contrast to Descartes, Whitehead argued that the fully actual entities constituting reality are events, or "actual occasions."⁶⁸ Because each actual entity comes into existence as a result of its prehensions of past actual entities, each actual entity is inherently social. Because an enduring individual consists of a series of these prehensive events, there are many opportunities each second for influence from others to affect the individual.

In contrast to a world of substances, Whitehead argued that a more adequate worldview begins with the conception of reality as "drops of experience, complex and interdependent."⁶⁹ He labeled each such drop an "occasion of experience," which he described as "a becomingness."⁷⁰ In Whitehead's language, each such occasion of experience is a subject that prehends the past, responds to it with a degree of freedom, however slight, reaches satisfaction, and then becomes an object to be prehended by the next occasion or pulse of experience. Such pulses occur many times per second. These

⁶⁶ Cobb's most technical explanation of Whitehead's thought and its appropriation for Christian theology can be found in A Christian Natural Theology.

⁶⁷ René Descartes, "Objections and Replies," in Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: University Press, 1988), 146.

⁶⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality, corr. edition, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 18-19.

⁶⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 175.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

actual entities, or actual occasions, or occasions of experience, “are the final real things of which the world is made up.”⁷¹

An actual occasion occurs as a result of a creative process of the many becoming one. The becoming occasion prehends the “many” – the actual occasions of its past – and creatively unifies them into a new “one.” Because this creative process takes a moment of time, the relationship between the parts and the whole of the simplest actual entity is always temporal and not merely spatial.⁷²

In the process of becoming, which Whitehead referred to as concrescence, the occasion of experience is characterized by subjectivity, as aspects of the past are creatively incorporated while others are rejected. Subjectivity at the fundamental level of simple actual occasions does not imply consciousness, although it does signal the presence of experience. In an unconscious way, the becoming or concrescing actual occasion feels the emotion, purpose, and valuation of the actual occasions it incorporates into its own process of becoming.⁷³ When the new “one” reaches satisfaction, its subjectivity ends, and it becomes an object, making a new contribution to the “many” that

⁷¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

⁷² Griffin points out that “a moment of human experience, in which the billions of neuronically experiences are unified into an experience that may involve consciousness and even self-consciousness, is an instance of ultimate reality. That this is the case is no surprise, of course, because Whitehead explicitly uses a moment of human experience – the only actuality the nature of which we know from the inside – as the very standard of actuality, in terms of which to understand other actualities.” Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, 180.

⁷³ Because Whitehead’s philosophy posits experience as a reality for each actual occasion, thus the name occasion of *experience*, his perspective falls into the category of a panexperientialist philosophy, in contrast to the materialist and dualist types of philosophy mentioned earlier in relationship to the mind-body problem.

will be prehended and creatively unified by the next actual occasion.⁷⁴ For Whitehead, “creativity,” “many,” and “one” are “the ultimate notions involved in the meaning of the synonymous terms ‘thing,’ ‘being,’ ‘entity.’”⁷⁵

Expansion of perception. The late modern worldview limits perception to our five senses, with particular emphasis on sight and touch. Whitehead’s ontology points to a much broader concept of perception. Because of the way that present actual entities emerge out of a creative response to past actual entities, existence is fundamentally relational, a relationality that involves *internal* relations. Since all actual entities are occasions of experience that perceive their pasts, perception obviously does not require sensory organs. If actualities that do not have sense organs perceive, then it follows that sensory perception must be a derivative form of perception. The recognition of nonsensory perception opens us to far more experience as human beings than occurs through our senses. The assumption that perception is limited to sensory perception is one of the critical presuppositions of the late modern worldview that Cobb rejects.

Nonsensory perception occurs through the process of prehension of the past.⁷⁶ Whitehead explained that he chose the word “prehension” because the “word *perceive* is, in our common usage, shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word *apprehension*, even with the adjective *cognitive* omitted. I

⁷⁴ Whitehead, Process and Reality, 21. Whitehead’s understanding of reality overcomes subject/object dualism by recognizing that there are distinct moments of subjectivity and objectivity for each actual occasion.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Whitehead was not the first to use the word prehension. It can be found, primarily in zoology, as early as 1828. In that context it meant “the action of taking hold (physically); grasping, seizing.” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “prehension.”

will use the word *prehension* [original emphasis] for *uncognitive* [original emphasis] apprehension: By this I mean *apprehension* [original emphasis] which may or may not be cognitive.”⁷⁷

Through prehension we have nonsensory experiences of reality. Whitehead emphasized that “[a]ctual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other. There are thus real individual facts of the togetherness of actual entities, which are real, individual, and particular, in the same sense in which actual entities and the prehensions are real, individual, and particular.”⁷⁸ In other words, because of the reality of nonsensory perception and internal relations, we have *experience* of the emotion, purpose, and valuation of the actual entities weprehend.⁷⁹ While most of these prehensions remain in the primary, unconscious state of existence, they are nevertheless influential on our perception and interpretation of reality.

For Whitehead, the underlying reality, what Spinoza referred to as the “one substance,” is “one underlying activity of realisation individualising itself in an interlocked plurality of modes. Thus, concrete fact is process. Its primary analysis is into underlying activity of prehension, and into realised prehensive events. . . . But individualisation does not mean substantial independence.”⁸⁰ From this perspective the relational connectedness of life is fundamental. Concreting energies constitute the continual emergence of actual occasions, which in their subjectivity prehend the past and

⁷⁷ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 69.

⁷⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 20.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁰ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 70.

unify the prehensions. At the moment of satisfaction of the unified pattern, the actual occasion moves from being subject to becoming object for the next moment of experience. Whitehead's deep intuition of this process overcomes subject-object dualism and provides a compelling sense of the relationship between the one and the many,⁸¹ a perennial issue in philosophy.

Expansion of what counts as reality. Recognition of nonsensory perception has significant implications for what we can know about reality. Our prehension of the past

reproduces in itself the general characteristics of an actual entity; it is referent to an external world, and in this sense will be said to have a 'vector character;' it involves emotion, and purpose, and valuation, and causation. In fact, any characteristic of an actual entity is reproduced in a prehension. . . . Actual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other.⁸²

From this perspective, focusing only on sensory perception is unnecessarily limiting. Far from being our only way of perceiving the world, it is not even the primary way that we perceive the world. Emphasis on sensory data leads to another presupposition of the late modern worldview that Cobb rejects – that what is real is the world of sense data and material things – we have to *see* it to believe it. Recognition of nonsensory perception leads to a much richer and more accurate worldview.

These three presuppositions – (1) that the fundamental elements that constitute the world are enduring substances, (2) that perception is limited to the data we experience

⁸¹ Whitehead, Process and Reality, 21. The three ultimate notions in Whitehead's metaphysics are "creativity," "many," and "one." In discussing creativity as the principle of novelty, Whitehead states that "the ultimate metaphysical principle is the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction. The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the 'many' which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive 'many' which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one, and are increased by one."

⁸² Ibid., 19-20.

through our senses, and (3) that what is real is equated with the objects of sense data and therefore the world of material things – all support the reigning philosophy of determinism, which so deeply influences scientific and philosophical thinking in the late modern world. Whitehead's rejection of these assumptions helps clear the way to affirming human freedom.

Affirming Human Freedom

Recognition that the fundamental elements that constitute the world are occasions of experience, rather than enduring objects, removes one of the critical assumptions that leads to determinism. To understand how occasions of experience contribute to human freedom, however, it is necessary to consider the distinctive ways in which occasions of experience can be organized into larger units.

Building on a social metaphor to convey the relationality of his worldview, Whitehead labeled a group of occasions that share a common trait as a result of "the genetic relations" among the occasions a "*society* [original emphasis] of occasions." He differentiated among the different types of societies by the ways actual occasions relate to one another. When a society "forms a single line of inheritance of its defining characteristic," Whitehead called it an "enduring object."⁸³ A molecule would be an example of an enduring object that is made up of occasions of experience that are temporally contiguous, successive, and characterized by an extremely high degree of similarity.

⁸³ Ibid.

Most ordinary physical objects, such as a boulder or a book, are analyzable in terms of strands of enduring objects. The molecules in a boulder are intimately interrelated. When groups of actual occasions form this type of spatiotemporal society, which can be analyzed in terms of enduring objects, it is an aggregational society.⁸⁴ An aggregational society is not simply an aggregate, such as a pile of rocks. The occasions that form the aggregational society of a single boulder have a cohesive unity –thus warranting designation as a *society* – that a pile of rocks does not have. Another distinguishing characteristic of an aggregational society, however, is that it has no “experiential unity and thereby no power to respond to its environment as a unity with even the slightest degree of freedom.”⁸⁵ Even if there is a degree of indeterminacy at the quantum level of a rock’s reality, that indeterminacy is canceled out by the “law of large numbers.”⁸⁶

Not all spatiotemporal societies, however, are organized as aggregational societies. When the society has in each moment a dominant or presiding occasion, as does a cat, that occasion has more power than other occasions in the society and is able to provide the society as a whole with a unity of experience not available to a rock. Societies organized this way are called compound individuals. As we investigate nature, it is not always clear whether an entity is a compound individual rather than an

⁸⁴ Griffin uses the term “aggregational” society as a substitute for Whitehead’s term “corpuscular society.” Because aggregational society conveys Whitehead’s meaning more clearly than corpuscular does, I am following Griffin’s usage. For Whitehead’s discussion of corpuscular societies, see Process and Reality, 35. Griffin discusses aggregational societies in Unsnarling the World-Knot, 186.

⁸⁵ Griffin, Unsnarling the World-Knot, 187.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

aggregational society. Proper categorization of a given entity requires empirical research. The important point, however, is that our world includes “hierarchies of compound individuals, in which more and more levels of compound individuals are involved.”⁸⁷ Human beings are vast societies of societies of societies. At each higher level there is experience and increasing degrees of freedom that are only possible because of the kinds and degree of experience and freedom at the lower level. Whitehead’s ontology overcomes the intractable mind-body problem discussed earlier, thus making the assertion of human freedom intelligible.

Human beings, like the rest of nature, are constituted by a continual process of re-creation. We have some sense of this at a macro level of existence. We know, for example, that the skin that provides a visible, yet permeable, boundary for our bodies is not precisely the same skin that covered us a month ago. The same is true for every part of our body. Our cells are continuously replacing themselves. From one moment to the next there is little noticeable change. Over a period of time, of course, we begin to observe changes in our bodies even though under normal conditions there is a sufficiently strong repetition of the past pattern that we recognize ourselves and each other.

We human beings consist of continually emerging events involved in a process of creativity that we and other things embody. Although we are most heavily influenced by our immediate past, we are not determined by it. We can change patterns rather than simply repeat them. If we change our context – begin to associate with a different group of people, or move into a different physical environment – influences from the new

⁸⁷ Ibid., 186-87.

context will increase in intensity as the strength of influences that were more dominant in the past recedes. Our prehension of the changes in our environment – physical and social – will affect our existence.

The people with whom we associate regularly and the physical environments in which we live, work, and play influence our thoughts and feelings. The habitual patterns of our thoughts and feelings affect our perception of the world, our interaction with others, our immune system, and ultimately our physical as well as our mental and spiritual health.⁸⁸ Our thoughts and feelings create powerful patterns that influence the concurring energies that constitute our existence.

It is precisely the biological, psychological, and sociological influences of the past, whether conceived as the distant past or the momentarily immediate past of one's current environment that we apprehend in each moment of re-creation, that inform the various deterministic theories. In Whitehead's worldview, a society of actual occasions organized as a compound individual, such as a human being, has a real degree of self-determination in responding to the apprehension of past actual occasions. Many factors, of course, influence the degree of freedom or self-determination that a given person can exercise at a particular point in his or her life. Nevertheless, there is a degree of real freedom. However, if the only factors we have to work with are factors from our past, then there remains a severe limitation on what is possible.

⁸⁸ The scientific field that studies these interactions is the relatively new field of psychoneuroimmunology. See, for example, the work of Harvard psychoneuroimmunologist Joan Borysenko, Minding the Body, Mending the Mind.

The step that introduces greater freedom and new possibilities into this worldview is Whitehead's conviction that there are novel possibilities and ideals continually introduced into our process of becoming. He argued that the reality of new possibilities – beckoning ideals and values that call us forward into possibilities that could not emerge simply from our prehension of the past – was best understood in terms of the reality of God. Because Whitehead was placing his focus on ideals within a naturalistic philosophy, he adhered to the ontological principle that “the reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities – in the nature of God for reasons of the highest absoluteness, and in the nature of definite temporal actual entities for reasons which refer to a particular environment.”⁸⁹ Only actual entities can have influence, so if ideals and new possibilities have any real power to influence us, they must exist somewhere, and for Whitehead, that somewhere is God.⁹⁰

Cobb's Doctrine of God

Traditional theism affirmed God as love. Over the centuries, however, divine love was increasingly subordinated to divine power. “Although the result of Jesus' message, life, and death should have been to redefine divine power in terms of divine love, this did not happen. Power, in the sense of controlling domination, remained the essential definition of deity.”⁹¹

Traditional ways of talking about God cannot meet the challenges posed by

⁸⁹ Whitehead, Process and Reality, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40, 44.

⁹¹ John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 53.

contemporary experience and our awareness of the profound and massive evil in the world. “Realities of our human situation do not seem to fit with the belief in the traditional conception of God as omnipotent creator and Lord of history.”⁹² This problem is not merely an intellectual one. It is a profound existential problem for many Christians. Because key aspects of traditional thought about the nature of God are not “distinctively or centrally Christian,” Cobb argues that we need to address them and change the ways in which we think and talk about God.⁹³

The Persuasive power of God. Cobb believes that we must reinterpret what we mean by deity in light of what is given to us in the life, message, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁹⁴ Focusing on Jesus does not lead us to think of God as sheer power. Cobb quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s insight that “[m]an’s religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world; he uses God as a *Deus ex machina*. The Bible however directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help.”⁹⁵ William Placher builds on Bonhoeffer’s perspective and claims that “a suffering God can help, first of all, by being in Alfred North Whitehead’s famous phrase, ‘the fellow sufferer who understands.’”⁹⁶

In order for us to convey more clearly our understanding of God, Placher argues that we have to recognize the problems with the language of power. Placher, following

⁹² Cobb, God and the World, 23.

⁹³ See especially Griffin, God Power, and Evil; and Evil Revisited; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, The End of Evil (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Anna Case-Winters, God’s Power (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

⁹⁴ Cobb, God and the World, 65.

⁹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Prisoner for God (New York: Macmillan Company, 1953); also published as Letters and Papers from Prison (New York: SCM Press, 1953). Quoted in Cobb, God and the World, 38.

⁹⁶ Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God, 18.

Barth, argues that “God is the one who loves in freedom. It is love freely given that defines God, and that love then implies a certain kind of power.” However, he quickly notes that “cultural definitions are so apt to pervade our thinking that, within five minutes of radically redefining what power means, we unconsciously fall back into the old connotations.”⁹⁷

Cobb communicates his divergence from traditional notions of power by referring to God’s power as persuasive rather than coercive. God beckons us, but cannot control our decision to follow. In each pulse of existence, God calls us forward, introducing novelty and creativity into the world, thus expanding the realm of realized possibilities and challenging the domination of the past. God is engaged in the moment-to-moment becoming of every actual occasion of experience in the universe, calling each forward to participate in God’s vision for the creative transformation of the world.

Through their freedom, human beings have real power, too. In conceiving of God’s power as persuasive rather than coercive, it follows that God works in relationship to our responsiveness to the initial aims that God grants us in each moment. The ways we respond to God influence the ways in which God can influence us in the future. In Cobb’s theology, human responses do make a difference. It is surely the history of human responses that makes Bonhoeffer and others speak with such conviction of the agony of God’s suffering.

God as immanent. Starting from his Christian convictions and appropriating aspects of Whitehead’s philosophical arguments for God, Cobb offers a doctrine of God

⁹⁷ Ibid., 17.

that emphasizes the ways in which God is involved with the world.⁹⁸ Despite Cobb's orientation as a philosophical theologian, he conceptualizes God in personal terms rather than as an abstract philosophical principle.⁹⁹

Cobb's appropriation of Whitehead's ontology offers many significant contributions to current theological discourse in our late modern society. One of these contributions is a worldview that supports the biblical texts and theological perspectives discussed earlier in the chapter that claim God's immanence in the world. The biblical

⁹⁸ It is important to note Cobb's discussion of natural theology. Cobb defines "theology" in its most general sense as "any coherent statement about matters of ultimate concern that recognizes that the perspective by which it is governed is received from a community of faith." Cobb, Christian Natural Theology, 252. From this perspective, theology is distinguished from an attempt to study religion objectively as occurs in the domain of religious studies. Natural theology is "often identified with that of theological importance which can be known independently of all that is special to a particular community. In other words, natural theology, from this point of view, is all that can be known relative to matters of ultimate human concern by reason alone, conceiving reason in this case as a universal human power" (259). Based on this definition, Cobb also rejects natural theology.

Unfortunately, the modern discussion and rejection of natural theology has failed to differentiate formal and substantive issues. In terms of formal issues, natural theology, "the product of an unhistorical reason," must be rejected. However natural theology is rejected on substantive grounds when it is identified with particular philosophical doctrines, such as the impassibility and immutability of God, which are in such serious tension with ways of thinking about God that are rooted in the Bible. However, there is "no principle inherent in reason that demands that philosophy will always conclude that God is impassible and immutable and hence, unaffected by and uninvolved in the affairs of human history" (260).

"[R]esponsible thinking about questions of ultimate human importance continues to go on outside the community of faith. Furthermore, many of the members of the community of faith who engage in such thinking consciously or unconsciously turn away from the convictions nurtured in them by the community while they pursue this thinking. It is extremely unfortunate that the partly legitimate rejection of natural theology has led much of Protestant theology to fail to come effectively to grips with this kind of responsible thinking" (261).

Cobb's identification of his own work as *Christian* natural theology emphasizes that "the perspective by which it is governed is received from a community of faith" (252). See also Cobb's response to David Tracy's questioning of the idea of "Christian natural theology" in Cobb, "Responses to Critiques," in John Cobb's Theology in Process, eds. David Ray Griffin and Thomas J. J. Altizer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 150-54.

⁹⁹ Although Whitehead's earliest references to God in Science and the Modern World spoke of God in terms of the philosophical principle of limitation, in Religion in the Making, Whitehead makes a significant change. Rather than rejecting the idea that God is concrete, Whitehead refers to God as an actual entity and attributes qualities to God that have a strongly personalistic tone: "purpose, knowledge, vision, wisdom, consciousness, and love." Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 178; Religion in the Making (1926; New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 100, 104, 153-60. For a detailed discussion of Whitehead's doctrine of God, see Cobb, Christian Natural Theology, 135-75.

understanding that God is the source of life and freedom is affirmed in Cobb's doctrine of God. Cobb argues that Whitehead's ontology supports these claims even more fully than Whitehead may have realized. In Cobb's words, "God must be conceived as being the reason that entities occur at all as well as determining the limits within which they can achieve their own forms. God's role in creation is more radical and fundamental than Whitehead's own language usually suggests."¹⁰⁰

Although Cobb's emphasis and the emphasis of this dissertation are on God's immanence, it is important to point out that Cobb's theology does not fall into the category of pantheism. Cobb makes this quite clear. "All experience of God. . . is experience of one who is 'wholly other.'" To Cobb, "'wholly other' means, first of all, numerically other." Human beings are not God. The "radical difference" between human beings and God remains.¹⁰¹ "More important God is experienced as qualitatively 'other.' This otherness is not only otherness to myself but otherness to every other experienced datum. God is not experienced as one-among-others. When one tries to describe what is experienced in the experience of God, the major factor in the description must be one of contrast."¹⁰²

The immanence of God refers to the constant involvement of the Spirit of God in our lives and in all of creation. Our response to the Spirit makes a difference. Nevertheless, as Cobb makes clear, the Spirit is not something human beings control. Michael Welker, whose "realistic theology of the Spirit" is very compatible with Cobb's

¹⁰⁰ Cobb, *God and the World*, 211.

¹⁰¹ Cobb, *Christian Natural Theology*, 238.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 239.

perspective, stresses this point as well. Welker argues that “the Spirit’s action brings help to concrete human beings and enlists the services of actual human beings. On the other hand, the Spirit’s action is a process that human beings cannot ‘make happen,’ cannot manage, cannot bring under their control.”¹⁰³

The call forward. The ideal that God grants us through the initial aim introduces a creative possibility into our existence that is in tension with the way the past would determine the present. Cobb names the “claim of the normative possibility upon us” the call forward.¹⁰⁴ It is through God’s immanence and God’s offering of the initial aim that we experience a power that calls us forward into a new life that conforms more fully to the ideals God offers us.

If we embrace an ideal in our life, it influences our sense of purpose and orients us toward the future. Determinism reduces the explanation for any sense of purpose we may have to antecedent conditions. While the past clearly influences our present experience of purpose, “it is equally true that in the concrete actuality of each momentary experience the meaning and effectiveness of past conditions are determined by the present purpose.”¹⁰⁵ If we cooperate with the leading of the Spirit to embrace new purpose in our life, the meaning and strength of past conditions in influencing our present life will be qualified.

Because weprehend the past in the very formation of our present moment of existence, the past cannot be dismissed as if it never happened. Whitehead’s perspective

¹⁰³ Welker, God the Spirit, 319.

¹⁰⁴ Cobb, God and the World, 49.

¹⁰⁵ Cobb, Christ in a Pluralistic Age, 69.

supports the claim of depth psychologists that the unconscious has a strong influence on us. Nevertheless, because God continually offers us the highest ideal possible for each moment of our life, we can become infused with purpose, value, new possibilities, and meaning such that the chains of domination that strain to hold us hostage to the past are broken.

Ideals influence what we aim at in the becomingness of our life. That we aim at becoming “in such a way as to achieve some optimum of satisfaction, immediately and also for the sake of a wider future – is a factor in human experience that should not be reduced to the conformal pressures of the past.”¹⁰⁶ This “aim at becoming” involves “novelty, spontaneity, growth, and self-transcendence. It is that element in experience by which a continuing restlessness is introduced into the human race, a refusal of mere acquiescence in the given.”¹⁰⁷

John Dewey and Henry Nelson Wieman also emphasized the importance of the human experience of the call forward. Although their work influenced Cobb, it is important to note how Cobb’s perspective differs from theirs. John Dewey wrote of the important human experience of being called forward by clear ideals that grasp our imagination. He argued that “a clear and intense conception of a union of ideal ends with actual conditions is capable of arousing steady emotion.” Dewey believed that in a “a distracted age” such as his own, “the need for such an idea is urgent.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 69-70.

¹⁰⁸ John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 51.

Wieman was a theologian who provided a penetrating analysis of what he called the communicative interchange that leads to creative transformation through the embrace of new ideals. Wieman identified creative interchange as the source of human good and dynamic transformation. At the same time, he recognized the human tendency to absolutize the good that we know so that it becomes, in effect, an obstacle to the actualization of new ideals. We become focused on the abstraction of ideals that were realized in the past and project them into the future rather than being open to new ideals. Cobb points out that in Wieman's analysis, it becomes clear that "this process is far less conscious, less intellectual, less voluntary, than Dewey suggests."¹⁰⁹

Cobb's criticism of both Dewey and Wieman is that because of their philosophy, they are unable to clarify why ideals have power. Dewey understands ideals as the projection of our imagination. In Dewey's words, "[t]he idealizing imagination seizes upon the most precious things found in the climacteric moments of experience and projects them."¹¹⁰ Dewey was a man who had strong ideals that he pursued with vigor throughout his life. Nevertheless, Cobb argues that "the claim of truth or of the needs of other persons upon me cannot be adequately understood as a projection."¹¹¹ Even if we are deeply committed to justice, for example, it may be difficult to sustain our commitment if we believe that the only claim justice has on us is one that occurs as a projection of our own imagination. It will also be difficult to offer good reasons for

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, *God and the World*, 51. See Henry N. Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (1946; reprint, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ Dewey, 48.

¹¹¹ Cobb, *God and the World*, 51.

others to commit the energy of their lives to join us.

The philosophical ontology Cobb proposes locates the source of ideals in God, who infuses new ideals into the world each moment. The ideal offered by God in the granting of the initial aim is not under the control of the human being, nor does it emerge from the person's past or from the person's imagination. The ideal is offered by God, the One who is wholly other than the person and yet so intimately engaged in all reality that God can offer an initial aim that will not only be the best possible for the individual but for the wider context in which the individual lives.

Cobb argues that it is important to pay attention to the fact that many people experience truth or disinterested concern for others as having a real claim on them, despite what it will cost them personally to respond to such claims.¹¹² The experience of the claim does not mean that a person always, or even regularly, acknowledges it and allows it to guide behavior. Nevertheless, this aspect of human experience deserves attention. "The cynical explanation of all altruistic action as motivated by some self-seeking goal is inadequate to the reality of human experience and behavior, although on the other side, anyone who supposes that his motivation is purely or even primarily altruistic needs to recognize how complex are the factors that lead to action."¹¹³ The claims we experience calling us forward can be exciting and energizing. They can also be frightening. It is very difficult and often painful to let go of what we know to embrace the

¹¹² Ibid., 46-47.

¹¹³ Ibid., 48.

future into which God calls us, which often leads us to ignore the initial aim God offers us as much as possible.

Cobb identifies the transcendent reality that introduces novelty and creative transformation into the world with the Logos as it is understood in Christian tradition.

Cobb explains that in the gospel of John,

the Logos names the preexistent divine reality that enters the world decisively in Jesus, and thus the idea of Logos was a bridge to the Hellenistic thought of deity as the universal principle of meaning and order. This ontological and cosmological status of the Logos, adopted by the fathers of the church, is far removed from that of human language, although human thought and speech are made possible by it and give expression to it. It is this inclusive meaning of Logos, pointing to that which transcends humanity but expresses itself through creatures, which is adopted in this book.¹¹⁴

Through the initial aim, the Logos, the Spirit of God, initiates the process of each concreting occasion of experience. What that means for us as human beings is that in each moment of our existence, God grants us an initial aim that is a call forward to the highest ideal possible. Because our present purpose influences how we evaluate and incorporate the past into the present, the initial aim offers us the most constructive ideal in terms of which we can creatively respond to the past.

Implications for Self-identity and Community

If a Spirit-filled worldview captures our imagination, the blinders imposed by the assumptions of the late modern worldview are removed. The possibilities for our self-identity and our sense of what a community of faith is can be changed radically. To accept the worldview Cobb offers is to know ourselves as intimately related to God, to all

¹¹⁴ Cobb, Christ in a Pluralistic Age, 72.

other human beings, and to creation, in ways that constitute the very nature of our existence. Despite the fact that our influence in the world – and even in our own community of faith – may be very slight, it is nevertheless clear that each life makes a difference, for both what it contributes in the present and what it offers to the possibilities of the future. Welker argues that “[t]he Spirit of God . . . generates a force field of love in which people strive so that all things might ‘work for good’ for their neighbors.”¹¹⁵ Although Welker agrees with Cobb that the Spirit works in us and through us whether we realize it or not, our conscious response to the Spirit is important.¹¹⁶

In the Spirit-filled world embraced by Cobb’s theology, our individual and corporate lives are not restricted to the realities of the settled past. Although the power of the past is not minimized, there is real hope because the future is not bound by the limitations and consequences of our past. God’s infusion of new ideals and new possibilities into our lives and the lives of others means that it is possible to break out of the domination of the past.

Although God works through us whether we know it or not, Cobb argues that it makes a difference if we believe God exists and if we believe God is continually offering us guidance. What we believe influences what we pay attention to, and when we pay closer attention to reality in terms of categories that include the reality of the sacred, we are more able to discern how the Spirit of God is moving in our own lives and in the lives of others.

¹¹⁵ Welker, *God the Spirit*, 227.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228-29.

Because of the powerful influences from our past and in our current environment, we must learn to differentiate internalized parental commands, fear, and strong personal desires and needs from the urging of God. Welker's work is particularly helpful in delineating this issue. He points out that repeating actions that reflect God's guidance in the past does not assure that we are responding to God's guidance at this time. He also notes that it is often difficult to differentiate between the invigorating pluralism of the Spirit and the "vitiating, disintegrative pluralisms within secular society."¹¹⁷ It is important for communities of faith to learn how to work together to discern when acts and perspectives are consonant with God's righteousness, justice, and mercy, and the plurality of ways in which the Spirit expresses the plenitude of God's glory, and when they are not.¹¹⁸ The practice of discernment needs to play a major part in the life of any community of faith that seeks not to be fully absorbed into the beliefs and values of the dominant culture in which it exists. The practice of discernment is equally important in our individual lives.

As we increase our concern about and sensitivity to the ways in which the Spirit is calling us forward, individually and communally, it is important to learn as much as we can about how we influence others. One of the primary ways human beings influence one another, including one another's self-identity, is through communication, both intentional and unintentional, both verbal and nonverbal. Therefore, it is necessary for practical theologians to attend to the complex dynamics of communication that occur within any

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 21-27.

community of faith and to explore how the multiple forms of communication that occur influence the development of a Christian self-identity. These issues are at the center of Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

Communication, Self-identity, and Communities of Faith

In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of self-identity in influencing how we understand ourselves, including our relationships with others and all of nature. Because our self-identity has significant implications for our spiritual life, I argued that it is important for practical theologians to think about the sociological and technological changes that have occurred in late modern societies such as the United States, which complicate the process of developing and sustaining faithful, mature Christian self-identities in ourselves and others. In Chapter 2, I argued that the immanent Spirit of the transcendent God is an ontological reality that sustains the world and makes it possible for us to escape biological, psychological, and sociological determinism and that awareness of this reality can change our narratively structured self-identity in fundamental and constructive ways.

It is the thesis of this chapter that the life-long process of developing and sustaining a Christian self-identity occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of intentional and unintentional communication events that are constituted by both verbal and nonverbal messages. Practical theologians attend to the intentional, formal communication practices of faith communities such as educational classes and activities, preaching, corporate confessions of faith, the reading of scripture, and other speech acts¹ that constitute worship and Christian education in a particular

¹ A speech act is an utterance that expresses communicative intention. A prayer for illumination, for example, would be a different kind of speech act than a prayer of confession. The communicative intention for the two acts is different. A speech act may be one sentence in length or much longer. Speech act theory

tradition. One of the functions of such speech acts is to encourage and nurture a sense of Christian self-identity. However, a Christian's self-identity is also influenced by unintentional, nonverbal messages that occur within these contexts, as well as intentional and unintentional communication events that occur outside the times identified as Christian education events or worship.

A particularly promising perspective for understanding the complex dynamics of human communication that occur in a community of faith is the narrative paradigm as developed by rhetorician Walter R. Fisher.² In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the key concepts of Fisher's paradigm and illustrate its heuristic value for practical theologians. In the second section, with the narrative paradigm in view as a philosophy of human communication, I identify some of the critical dynamics of the communication process that need to be taken into consideration when studying the communication within a particular community.

The Narrative Paradigm

The narrative paradigm offers a descriptive, philosophical view of human communication. As suggested by its subtitle, Fisher's book is aimed toward developing a philosophy of reason, value, and action. Within this philosophy, human beings are

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is associated with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953); J. L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Philosophy of Language (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964); and John Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). The necessity of considering speech acts within the context of an actual communication episode is stressed by communication theorists. See Thomas A. Frentz and Thomas B. Farrell, "Language-Action Paradigm," Quarterly Journal of Speech 62 (Dec. 1976), 333-49.

² See Fisher, Human Communication as Narration.

↑ "she (?)
↑ see Bib.

described in terms of the root metaphor “storyteller,” *homo narrans*.³ Fisher argues that across cultures we find that “human beings are inherently story tellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience. . . .

[W]e experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends.”⁴ From this perspective, all the various communication genres – all modes of symbolic action⁵ – can be understood more fully when considered in light of the stories in which they are embedded.

To understand the narrative paradigm, says Fisher, we need to step back from thinking of narrative only in terms of the genre of narrative. He, of course, acknowledges the significance of the genre of narrative. However, while the narrative paradigm conceives of human beings as *homo narrans*, the paradigm is not limited to, modes of communication that fall within the genre of narrative. Rather it seeks to disclose a deeper and more inclusive narrative aspect of all human communication, one that applies to all genres.

³ Ibid., 62.

⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵ Symbolic action is a term associated with the sociologist George Herbert Mead, whose work formed what became known as the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism. See Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*. It is also the term used by Kenneth Burke (*Language as Symbolic Action* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966]). Both Mead and Burke emphasize that a symbol is anything that we invest with meaning or feeling. For Burke the human ability to engage in symbolic action is what sets human beings apart from other creatures. Burke defines human beings as “the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative, . . . separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection” (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 16). Burke acknowledges the significance of Mead’s emphasis on the human use of symbols as the basis for a new understanding of the self. See Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York: Vintage, 1941), 308; and *A Grammar of Motives* (1946; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 236-38. Fisher uses the terms “symbol” and “symbolic action” in a way that is consistent with Mead and Burke.

The narrative paradigm describes the human capacity to respond to the multiplicity of conflicting stories we hear in terms of narrative coherence (also referred to as narrative probability), whether or not the story “hangs together,” and narrative fidelity, whether or not the story “rings true.”⁶ The stories in our environment, which come in many forms and from many sources, offer ways of thinking about all aspects of life – who we are, what life means, what constitutes success, what we need to do to stay healthy, what Christianity is all about, and so forth. As indicated in chapter one, one of the sources of stress in late modern societies is that serious but conflicting answers are provided to all these questions by the stories told by experts in their respective fields of inquiry. We are left to choose among the stories in making decisions about our theology, relationships, health, political commitments, and finances, as well as all the other aspects of life. In addition to the stories offered by experts in various fields, stories are offered by radio programs, MTV, movies, newscasters, music, art, televangelists, books, news magazines, tabloids, politicians, the people whom we encounter regularly, and corporations who seek to influence our belief in certain stories through the sophisticated use of symbolic actions within the genre of media advertising.

Some of the stories we learn from these diverse sources are in narrative form. In other cases the narrative is implicit. Regardless of the form, however, narration plays a role. Fisher defines narration as “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. . . . So understood,

⁶ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 5.

narration has relevance to real as well as fictive creations, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination.”⁷

Although the concept of narrative is similar in some respects to the concept of worldview, it is a far more dynamic concept and as such can generate insights that are not apparent when working with the concept of worldview. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines worldview as a people’s “picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.”⁸ The narrative paradigm considers these same elements but incorporates them in a more dynamic metaphor.

Worldview is a spatial metaphor. It draws our attention to the view available from a particular location in the socio-economic-geographic world. As a spatial metaphor, it lacks an inherent sense of dynamism. In contrast, the metaphor of narrative entails characters who engage in symbolic acts within various plots that occur in different scenes across time. The possibilities for conflict and the multiplicity of ways in which conflict might be resolved remind us that characters can be involved in multiple plot lines simultaneously, and the various plots in which they are entangled can take unexpected turns. In contrast to the more static metaphor of worldview, narrative emphasizes the active role of actors as authors/storytellers, and audience members/co-authors of multiple emergent stories that are never set in a final, unchangeable form.⁹

⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁸ Geertz, 127.

⁹ Another alternative metaphor to worldview is drama. This is the metaphor Kenneth Burke develops. Burke’s dramatisic pentad identifies five key elements of any communication event: agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose. Burke’s terms are useful in that they are easy to remember and remind us not to leave

Because the narrative paradigm points to the narrativity that informs any discourse, it is offered as an approach to the study of all forms of human communication, including those that have been the focus of the discipline of rhetoric historically.

Expanding the Domain of Rhetoric

Traditionally, the discipline of rhetoric focused only on communication events in which there was a clear intention to persuade. Aristotle was concerned about rhetoric that took place in public civil events, such as judicial, legislative, or ceremonial oratory.¹⁰ Aristotle defined rhetoric as the faculty of discovering the available means of persuasion in a particular situation.¹¹ He identified three means of persuasion: *ethos*, the credibility of the speaker, *pathos*, the emotion of the audience relative to the subject under discussion, and *logos*, the logic of the argument itself.¹² While these aspects of persuasion continue to be part of contemporary communication theory and rhetoric, the definition and domain of rhetoric have changed significantly as a result of the influence of Kenneth Burke, considered by many to be the most significant rhetorician of the

out any of the five interdependent aspects, each of which is influential in any communication event. See Burke, Grammar of Motives, xv-xxiii. Fisher chose the metaphor of narrative rather than drama for two reasons. The first is to underline the constructive role of actors in authoring the story. Whether persons are agents – that is, authors/storytellers, or audience members/co-authors – people are conceived of as full participants in creating messages. Institutions provide “plots,” however, they are never settled scripts. The second advantage of the narrative metaphor is that drama implies a presentational standard of evaluation. Focus is placed on how well one enacts one’s role. Although Burke does not focus on such a standard, it is implied by the metaphor. In contrast, Fisher emphasizes “the norm of humane, reasonable action.” Identification does not necessarily ensure such a result. Fisher wants to strengthen the focus on humane, reasonable action by combining identification with the concept of narrative rationality and using identification to clarify why people adopt the stories they do. See Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 18-19.

¹⁰ Aristotle, On Rhetoric, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 47-50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37-39.

twentieth century.

Rather than limiting rhetoric to intentional efforts to persuade, Burke claimed that rhetoric is rooted in a natural, wholly realistic function of language itself. He argued that the rhetorical function of language is “continually born anew, the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”¹³

Burke’s study of the processes of persuasion led him to conclude that rhetoric is most fruitfully understood as “the symbolic function of inducement, rather than as a form of discourse. . . . an attribute of *all* symbolic expression and action.”¹⁴ He claimed that “wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric and wherever there is meaning, there is persuasion.”¹⁵ Burke emphasized the ontological aspect of rhetoric, claiming that “rhetoric is most fundamentally a symbolic transaction in and about social reality.”¹⁶

Identification. According to Burke, the critical dynamic in any communication that is persuasive is the process of identification.¹⁷ Without some degree of identification, whether realistic or fanciful, a person will not be influenced by another’s message, no matter how carefully crafted and logically argued it may be. Fisher’s work builds on this insight. The emphasis on identification does not imply that the logic of one’s argument is irrelevant to one’s persuasiveness. However, the logic of one’s argument *by itself* is not sufficient to persuade. For Fisher, as for Burke, the process of identification is the key to understanding influence in any domain of human

¹³ Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-27.

communication. From the perspective of the narrative paradigm, to understand the persuasiveness of any form of communication, one must consider it in terms of its context. Without knowing the context, one cannot discover the dynamics of identification that moved people to respond to the communication as they did. All forms of human communication, whether in the domain of science, religion, politics, literature, entertainment, business, or the realm of interpersonal relationships, are understood as “historical as well as situational, as stories or accounts competing with other stories or accounts purportedly constituted by good reasons, as rational when the stories satisfy the demands of narrative probability [narrative coherence] and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements.”¹⁸ The variable that influences the degree to which we will respond to a story or account as satisfying the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity is identification, which is the operative principle in narrative rationality.¹⁹

Identification occurs in a vast range of ways. It may involve our response to the actors involved, specific symbolic acts (verbal and/or nonverbal, intentional and/or unintentional acts), the context in which the communication occurs, the means of sharing the message (e.g., written book by a respected publisher, internet, or talk show), or the perceived purpose of the communication (e.g., to strengthen or destroy the church, to make money or share power.)

Part of the emergent narrative of reality we participate in constructing involves

¹⁸ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

our habitual patterns of response to certain “types” of characters. As a result of personal experiences and socialization into the narratives of our family, local community, and larger culture, we develop patterned responses to people based on age, gender, skin color, clothing, accent, clarity of speech, facial expressions, perceived socio-economic status, weight, height, and so forth. These generalizations, which vary in degree of positive or negative valence, are a natural and necessary part of the processing of the vast diversity of experiences and people we encounter. The generalizations develop into prejudice and discriminatory actions when the generalizations we make are not open to correction in light of new information or experience. The conscious and unconscious habits of attribution we make in response to a person influence the degree to which we identify with the person and thus the degree to which we are influenced by his or her arguments.

The dynamics of identification are also influenced by the kinds of communication experiences we have with people over time. Communication experiences that occurred in the past play into current communication events in subtle, yet influential, ways. As discussed in chapter two, Whitehead’s ontology emphasizes the ways in which the past flows into the present through the process of nonsensory prehensions. We need not consciously think about the past for it to have an influence. It is not possible to write off the past as history that does not influence the present. Efforts to ignore the past, including the actions of generations who lived before we were born, only push destructive aspects of that past further into our unconscious. Burke claimed, however, that the unconscious, as well as the conscious, motives find their way into a person’s choice of discursive and

nondiscursive symbols.²⁰ These symbols, in turn, influence the degree to which we identify with particular others or communities.

The symbols others use or do not use influence the degree to which we identify with them. Our even partial identification with another carries implications for who we understand ourselves to be. Our self-identity, the self-reflexive understanding we have of ourselves in terms of our autobiography, is continually reinforced or modified by the people with whom we identify. Exploring the dynamics of identification in a community of faith will help disclose the values that are functioning implicitly, as well as explicitly, in a congregation.

In some situations, a key element in establishing identification, and thus influence, is the use of forms of discourse recognized as legitimate by a particular community. The way the story of an academic discipline is told includes an understanding of the kinds of speech acts, the forms of argument, that are considered legitimate within that discipline. In the diverse communities of academic theologians, there are differences of opinion regarding what discursive forms constitute theology. Theology that values inclusion of arguments based on human experience is legitimate in some communities. In other communities theological arguments that include evidence based on human experience are rejected or devalued. Which perspective is correct? There is no way to resolve the issue permanently.

The determination of the “right” way to do theology is a contingent matter. It is contingent on the influence of various members within the community, and the positions

²⁰ Burke, Grammar of Motives.

they hold on the question. Such contingent matters can only be settled within a particular community for a particular period of time. There is no way to “demonstrate” or “prove” that one type of argument is theological while another is not. In deciding what kinds of rhetorical strategies will count as theological arguments, the community involved will be influenced by many things, including the logic of the arguments presented by scholars with different points of view on the question. However, the narrative paradigm would push us to recognize that the logic of the arguments will function within a more fundamental process of identification we may not recognize. The often subtle, yet profound, dynamics of identification must be taken into account when one tries to account for the different degrees of influence granted to various members of the community. One must consider the totality of the communication event and the relationship of the present communication to communication events that have occurred previously. Over time, people develop a stronger identification with some colleagues than they do with others. The greater the degree of identification, the more the arguments presented by the person will be influential.

Identification divides and connects simultaneously. Burke and Fisher emphasize that the philosophical roots of rhetoric are ontological, not epistemological. Epistemologically, rhetoric contributes to what we know. Ontologically, however, rhetoric – our verbal and nonverbal, intentional and unintentional communication with others – constructs social reality, including our perception of ourselves. Our self-identity

emerges from our interaction with others.²¹ As suggested in chapter one, the people in our immediate community influence us. However, we may also be influenced by fictional and non-fictional people we read about, see on television, or meet in cyberspace.

The people who have the greatest influence on us are not influential primarily because of the inherent rationality of the arguments they offer, but because, for some conscious or unconscious reason, we identify with them. When we perceive ourselves as consubstantial with others, we tend to find their arguments compelling. We assimilate their values and ways of thinking into our own. For reasons their families and friends may never understand fully, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the young murderers in Littleton, Colorado, who were discussed in chapter one, identified with neo-Nazi propaganda. Their brutal rampage may have been encouraged by their involvement with the propaganda.

The kinds of people with whom they were identifying share characteristics with those who influenced the terrorist Timothy McVeigh. On July 5, 1995, the New York Times continued its ongoing effort to untangle the web of evil that led to the April 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in which 167 people died. A report on McVeigh described his involvement in "an alienated current in American life, stretching from survivalist bunkers in Montana and Idaho, Arizona 'desert rats' fearful that the Government would take their guns away, Michigan militiamen, and compounds of white supremacists and religious cultists tucked into the remote forested mountains here in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri." According to the article

²¹ George Herbert Mead's analysis of the emergence of self-identity through social interaction

there is a common religious thread, called Christian Identity, running through many of the groups, including Posse Comitatus, Rev. Butler's Church of Jesus Christ Christian, Mr. Pierce's Cosmotheist Church (Mr. Pierce, described as a spiritual leader to many of the extremists, is a former physics professor and research scientist, and the author of a novel, 'The Turner Diaries', that has become a favorite of right-wing extremist groups around the country. - NYTimes, A18), and the Order, according to studies by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and others. Christian Identity holds that Anglo-Saxons are God's true 'chosen people,' that Jews are the spawn of Satan and that non-whites are 'mud people,' on the level of animals.²²

The reporter noted that one of the primary places people from such groups meet is the gun show circuit. At the gun show in a northwestern Arkansas town, "armed Christian survivalist compounds were a major topic at the literature booth, which featured Army manuals on survival, urban warfare, and hand to hand fighting, along with 'Creating Covenant Communities,' instructions for those who would 'reject the mark of the beast' by the 'internationally acclaimed patriot author' Robert K. Spear."²³

Since the 1995 attack in Oklahoma City, the United States has been rocked by a number of terrorist acts, often committed by a lone gunman with links to a white supremacist organization. Buford O. Furrow, who was responsible for the shootings at a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles and the murder of Joseph Ito, a 39-year-old postal worker delivering mail on his midday rounds in August 1999, was also identified as a follower of the pseudo-religious ideology Christian Identity.²⁴

One of the critical lessons to be learned from the exposure of these hate groups is the way in which emphasis on identity can simultaneously encourage division in

continues to be influential. See, for example, Mead, Mind, Self and Society.

²² John Kifner, "Bomb Suspect Felt at Home Riding the Gun Show Circuit: McVeigh's World, New York Times, 5 July 1995, A18-19.

²³ Ibid, A19.

destructive ways. To identify ourselves as Christian is to distinguish ourselves from that which we consider unChristian, or at least non-Christian.. However, since the beginning of Christianity, the truth and goodness of Christianity has all too often been promoted by denouncing the inadequacy of Judaism and the unacceptability of Jews. Murderers such as Buford often justify their hatred of Jews by referring to biblical passages such as the story of Jesus' conflict with Jewish leaders in John 8:42-47. In this narrative, Jesus is reported to have said,

'If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. . . . Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. . . . Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

Anti-Semites take an utterance like this out of the context of the Bible as a whole and turn it into a propositional statement of fact. Taken as such, it is then used as justification for "faithful" Christians to hate Jews and identify them as children of the devil. The role Christians have played in fanning the flames of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism through the centuries must be remembered and discussed in churches as we encourage the development of Christian self-identity.²⁵ It is not enough to ignore such biblical verses and stress those that offer a very different understanding of the Jews and their ongoing covenant with God. Even if such verses are not read in worship or taught in Bible study, they remain in the Bible and can be used by those who claim to use the Bible as their authority.

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24 → ²⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, Faith and Fratricide; and Clark M. Williamson, Has God Rejected His People?.

↑ Renumber starting here.

Appeals to Christian identity have been used historically, as well as today, to support racism, as well as anti-Semitism. One of the chilling effects of the internet that has come to attention since the 1995 article on McVeigh is the significant proliferation of web sites that preach a doctrine of hate combined with Christian symbols in an effort to build identification between their hatred and faithful Christian practice. Because people can gain access to a web site more easily and more often than they can get to a gun show, the internet has led to significant multiplication of white supremacist hate sites in just the last couple of years. Their arguments not only implicitly, but explicitly, promote division, as strongly as they promote identification. “We” are different from and superior to “them,” and “they” are ruining “our” world. The arguments are often tightly crafted and highly logical. It is in part the opportunity for identification of oneself as better than others that provides the persuasive intensity, however. It is not uncommon for their arguments to include claims of being Christian.

In Chapter 1, I explored the ways Christian self-identity influenced and strengthened Fannie Lou Hamer. At the same time that she was using her Christian convictions to help increase the freedom and dignity of African Americans in this country, another leader, Sam Bowers, was using Christianity as support for his perspective. Bowers was the educated, articulate Imperial Wizard of a new wing of the Klan he called the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. Referring to his group as “Christian militants,”²⁶ Bowers called for an approach that carried out violence

²⁶ Marsh, 96.

and intimidation secretly. Members were specifically not to wear their Ku Klux Klan uniforms at public events. Harassment was to be carried out in ways that appeared to be random in order to increase the environment of fear and intimidation.

Bowers used biblical narratives explicitly to offer an account of his perspective. His telling of the Christian story is deeply heretical and destructive. Nevertheless, many people identified with him and were induced to cooperate with his evil plans. Bowers emphasized two biblical figures in the development of his theology: Elijah and Paul. Considering Elijah's slaughter of the 450 false prophets as a necessary act of violence in obedience to the one God, he argued that just as Elijah did not carry out the violence with vengeance or passion, so, too, Bowers's followers were to express a similar attitude when situations required them to murder the enemies of God. Bowers told his followers, "If it is necessary to eliminate someone, it should be done with no malice, in complete silence and in the manner of a Christian act."²⁷

Bowers' second theological influence was Paul. He emphasized Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which led Bowers to argue that the resurrection of Jesus was the axis on which all world history turned. In a deeply heretical way, Bowers believed "in the Christ-centered shape of all reality."²⁸ He saw his vocation as a priest of Jesus Christ who must respond with "calculated and confident militancy" in eliminating heretics, "for heresy cannot be forgiven, it can only be eliminated."²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

²⁸ Ibid., 63.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

Bowers was an educated man. His grandfather was a prominent attorney in Mississippi who served in the United States Congress for several years. For three generations Bowers's family had been active in the Methodist church. Bowers himself later became a Baptist and began teaching an adult men's Sunday School class in Laurel, Mississippi, which he continues to do. His intellectual abilities and education allowed him to make a logical, although deeply heretical, argument for the murder of Jews and blacks.

Unlike many other white supremacists, he did not deny the Jewish background of Christianity. Valuing the First Testament as essential to a proper understanding of who Jesus was, he claimed that there were no longer any real Jews. With regard to Jesus, he followed the argument of racist theologian and historian Houston Steward Chamberlain, who argued in The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century (1899) that Jesus was not a Jew but a Galilean, born of Aryan colonists who lived in ancient Galilee.³⁰ All real Jews, Bowers argued, accepted Jesus as the Messiah; therefore, they were Christians and not Jews. Those who did not accept Christ could not be real Jews and were merely impostors hiding under the cover of an ancient theological system as part of an international conspiracy. For Bowers, those who called themselves Jews were embodiments of the Antichrist.³¹

For people who claimed a Christian self-identity, believed in racial inequality and identified with Bowers, his telling of the "Christian" story had narrative coherence and

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ Ibid., 74.

narrative fidelity. Racial inequality has been emphasized since the founding of the United States in narratives offered to justify the building of this nation on the backs of slaves and the restriction of civil rights for African Americans. By linking the cultural narrative of racial prejudice to Christian faith, Bowers sought to elevate prejudice to the level of a sacred doctrine, thus justifying a particular approach to murder as “Christian practice.”

Bowers was suspected of involvement in at least nine murders, 75 bombings of black churches, and as many as 300 other bombings, beatings and assaults.³² In 1967 Bowers was convicted of conspiring to violate the civil rights of three civil rights workers who were murdered in 1964. He ultimately served six years of a ten-year sentence in a Federal Prison. He continues to live in Mississippi at this time, proclaiming himself a “Mississippi native pin ball operator and preacher of Jesus the Galilean.”³³

Theologian Charles Marsh concludes his analysis of Bowers’s theology and political activity by arguing that

[t]o say that there is a perilous conflation of the theological and the political, as though this might help explain the menacing confusion between political and religious perception, fails to appreciate the level of theological realism in Bowers’s analysis. The banks, the academy, the media, the state, and the soviets are first and foremost metaphysical realities; only secondarily and ‘operationally’ can they be construed as institutions or social entities. Looming above the desperate, driven zeal of Bowers and his Christian patriots, as they pursued their mission of eliminating the heretics, was the specter of the civil rights workers and the Jews existing primarily as demonic powers – as emissaries of darkness, as the Antichrist(s).³⁴

³² Ibid., 49.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

Bowers claimed he was carrying out his vocation based on faith in the words of the Pauline³⁵ letter to the Ephesians: “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6;12 RSV). He saw Elijah’s killing of the 450 false prophets as the paradigm for how God requires the faithful to deal with such powers and principalities.

Ironically, the biblical passages in Ephesians that structured Bowers’ deep convictions and led to terrorism and murder were the same passages Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer quoted in explaining why she had the courage to stand up to those who threatened her and tried to stop her. She was able to express Christian love in the face of prejudice, hatred, and physical violence. The use of Ephesians occurs in Hamer’s Christian narrative and in the Christian narrative Bowers’ created. Yet the difference between the two narratives could hardly be more stark. Biblical knowledge and a strong sense of Christian self-identity do not necessarily lead to a faithful telling and living of the Christian story. The juxtaposition of Mrs. Hamer’s Christian narrative with Sam Bowers’ highlights the important role of discerning communities in helping people to explore critically the experiences, narratives, and values that are driving their theological claims. As I discuss in Chapter 4, John Cobb addresses this issue directly in his efforts to encourage lay persons to develop their self-identity and critical competencies as practical theologians.³⁶

³⁵ The term “Pauline” can mean either written by Paul or written by someone heavily influenced by Paul. Most leading New Testament scholars now consider Ephesians to be Pauline in the second sense.

³⁶ Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian.

The destructiveness of Bowers's interpretation of Christian faith provides a vivid illustration of Cobb's point that many Christians are lukewarm in their faith because they are aware of the violence Christians have perpetrated throughout the centuries in the name of Christ. Not knowing how to argue theologically against influential persons such as Bowers, they are uncomfortable proclaiming their faith in a confident way.³⁷ The dissonance Bowers, McVeigh, Buford, and others create in the minds and hearts of Christians through the evil they perpetrate in the name of Christian faith must be addressed directly when we deal with issues of Christian self-identities.

The pervasiveness of hate propaganda, and its influence on the self-identity of those who find it compelling, is a significant issue in our late modern society. In order to understand the dynamics involved in fostering hate, we need to understand the process of persuasion more fully.

Broadening the Concept of Human Rationality

Fisher argues that to understand the process of persuasion, we need a more adequate way of conceptualizing human rationality. He claims that we gain more insight into human reasoning and action when we think in terms of narrative rationality. Narrative rationality is an alternative to the understanding of rationality as it is conceptualized in the rational-world paradigm. The rational-world paradigm views human beings as rational beings whose "paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is argument—discourse that features clear-cut inferential or implicative structures." One's rationality is determined by one's "subject-matter

³⁷ Cobb, Reclaiming the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 15-16.

knowledge, argumentative ability, and skill in employing the rules of advocacy in given fields.”³⁸

Within the rational-world paradigm, the world is understood to be a “set of logical puzzles that can be solved through appropriate analysis and application of reason conceived as an argumentative construct.”³⁹ The rules for practical reasoning vary in different contexts. However, within a given field, one’s rationality is defined in terms of one’s ability to argue and respond to arguments following the rules of reasoning honored by that field. This perspective, which Fisher describes as the rational-world paradigm, governs theory construction in many of the natural and human sciences. From within this paradigm, human rationality is defined in terms of one’s ability to create, evaluate, and respond to arguments that “feature clear-cut inferential or implicative structures” appropriate to a particular field of discourse.⁴⁰ The field of discourse may be a particular academic discipline, a legal context, a political context, or the discourse of those vested with decision-making power in the governing body of a religious organization. Over time, each field of discourse develops both implicit and explicit understandings of the forms of discourse that “count” as rational argument. “The philosophical ground of the rational-world paradigm is epistemology. Its linguistic materials are self-evident propositions, demonstrations, and proofs—the verbal expressions of certain and probable knowing.”⁴¹

³⁸ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 59.

³⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁴¹ Ibid., 60.

While there is an important place for carefully constructed argument within the narrative paradigm, Fisher believes that it occurs as a subset of a more inclusive narrativity that characterizes all human thought. Failure to give attention to the more inclusive narrative leads us to misunderstand why a particular argument is, in fact, compelling to some and not to others. It also leads us to ignore the values that are necessarily present in all forms of argument.

Broadening our conception of human rationality increases our ability to analyze the persuasiveness of particular people and messages in a particular situation. It also increases our ability to create messages that embody our theological convictions in ways that will be as efficacious as possible – in the hope of achieving what David Cunningham aptly calls “faithful persuasion.”⁴²

Fisher broadens the conception of human rationality by working with the metaphor of narrative. Rationality involves recounting and accounting for human choice and action. “Regardless of the form they are given, recounting and accounting for constitute stories.”⁴³ Recounting occurs in the forms of history or biography. Accounting typically occurs in the forms of theory or argument. No matter what form the accountings or recountings take, however, “they constitute stories we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life-world.”⁴⁴

Narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. In contrast to rationality as it is conceived within the rational-world paradigm, narrative rationality is not limited to one’s

⁴² David S. Cunningham, Faithful Persuasion (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

⁴³ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

educated ability to understand and utilize the argumentative forms favored within a particular discourse. Rather, human rationality is reflected in “the narrative impulse [that] is part of our very being because we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization.”⁴⁵ This narrative impulse is expressed in our assessment of whether or not a story we are told “hangs together” and “rings true” in light of other understandings of reality we believe to be true. These two categories, narrative coherence (also referred to as narrative probability) and narrative fidelity, identify two criteria human beings use intuitively when they are presented with a story for their adherence, whether that story has to do with the nature of society, human nature, science, or any other aspect of existence.⁴⁶

Within this broadened understanding of rationality, people who are not persuaded by a pastor, theologian, religious educator, political candidate, or corporate spokesperson cannot be dismissed as irrational because they do not utilize the specific forms of argument that experts in a particular field employ. One of the effects of conceptualizing rationality in the terms offered by the narrative paradigm is that it respects the wisdom of laypersons and legitimizes their participation in discourse that is often limited to experts. Narrative rationality challenges the story that there is “expert” argument that does not entail values and should, therefore, be assessed only in terms of technical reasoning.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 65. See also Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 39 (Sept. 1971): 291-311; Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 5 (1962-63), 304-26; 332-45; Stephen D. Krashen, Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982).

⁴⁶ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 64.

⁴⁷ Fisher is particularly concerned about democratizing the field of participants in public moral argument. On the issue of nuclear war, for example, he analyzes the responses to Jonathan Schell’s The Fate of the Earth (New York: Avon, 1982). He shows how the experts who disagreed with Schell’s assessment of nuclear policy used a strategy of reaffirming Schell’s moral concern while subverting the validity of his reasoning. In the response of the experts, “Public moral argument was thus overwhelmed by

This broadened conception of human rationality supports Cobb's emphasis on encouraging clergy and lay persons to understand themselves as practical theologians who have the ability and the responsibility to think theologically. The claim that theology can only be done by academic "experts" is but one way of narrating the story of what theology is and what kinds of speech acts constitute "real" theology. Cobb believes that acceptance of that story has been very detrimental to the church in the United States.⁴⁸

The application of *narrative coherence* and *narrative fidelity* can be illustrated by what happens each year when Presbyterians listen to candidates for moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). They hear each candidate offer a perspective, a story, explaining the current state of the church, a vision for the church today, and the processes and perspectives the candidate would encourage if elected moderator. Presbyterians, regardless of their degree of formal education or experience with Presbyterian polity and theology, will have an awareness of whether or not the story the candidate presents has *narrative coherence*. Does it "hang together?" Those who hear and talk with the candidate will also test whether what the candidate says has *narrative fidelity*. Does the candidate's story "ring true?" Does it make sense in light of other stories about life and the church the person believes to be true? The point Fisher emphasizes is that without any formal training in the process, people have an intuitive response to the narrative coherence and narrative fidelity of the stories that are offered for their adherence. The claim is not that a person's response is necessarily correct. The

privileged argument. . . [I]t was submerged by ideological and bureaucratic arguments that insisted on rival moralities and technical argument, which denuded it of morality altogether, making the dispute one for 'experts' alone to consider." Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 69-71.

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claim is that the response is rational. People have “good reasons” for responding the way they do, that is, they have some concept of the “good,” however wise or perverse, that provides the logic for why they respond positively to some stories and negatively to others.⁴⁹ Inherent in people’s responses are the echoes of other narratives each believes to be true. We do not respond to the accounts offered by a pastor proclaiming the gospel without being influenced, in ways that may be largely unconscious, by narratives we have adopted from other sources.

Fisher stresses that all human beings who are not mentally disabled have the capacity to intuit whether or not a story “hangs together.” At the same time, Fisher emphasizes the need to help people sharpen their rhetorical competencies. From this perspective, rhetorical competence includes the ability to recognize and evaluate the values that are implicit in all communication. “Rhetorical communication is as laden with values as it is with what we call reasons. *Humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning animals.*”⁵⁰ Value judgments are inevitable, and they are not irrational. At the same time, we will never have consensus about a hierarchy of values that we can all use to adjudicate among the stories that are offered for our adherence. Nevertheless, as a rhetorician, Fisher argues that the discipline of rhetoric has the obligation to inform people about “the nature and function of values just as we have informed them about the nature of functions of reasons.” Gary Cronkite’s observation

→⁴⁸ Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian; and Reclaiming the Church.

⁴⁹ Fisher, Human Communication as Narration, 106-08. The “logic of good reasons” is developed in the following pages.

⁵⁰ Fisher, 107.

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twenty-five years ago is at least as significant today as it was when he originally wrote it: “The best antidote for a sophistic rhetor is a sophisticated rhetoree, and we had best get at the business of providing such an antidote.”⁵¹

Our self-identity is influenced by the ways we respond to the constant barrage of stories that confront us. Because these stories can influence who we understand ourselves to be and what we think life is about, it is important theologically for clergy and Christian educators to help Christians think more consciously and critically about the multitude of stories that are promulgated through a vast array of forms and media in our society. Recognizing the ways in which we can assess more critically the narrative coherence and narrative fidelity of a particular story increases rhetorical competence.

Assessing narrative coherence. Narrative coherence, whether or not a story “hangs together,” is assessed in terms of three dimensions: structural, material, and characterological coherence. The structural or argumentative coherence of the communication is assessed based on issues internal to the communication event itself. It includes identifying issues such as contradictions and inconsistencies within the message. A second dimension of assessment involves material coherence, which requires comparing and contrasting one account or story to others. It entails considering if all significant facts are included, if counterarguments have been taken into account, and if all the relevant issues are considered. The story a candidate for leadership in a denomination

⁵¹ Gary L. Cronkhite, “Rhetoric, Communication, and Psychoepistemology,” in Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition, ed. Walter R. Fisher (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 262.

presents may be internally coherent, but it will not be materially coherent if people realize that important facts, counterarguments, and relevant issues are ignored.⁵²

The third dimension of narrative coherence is characterological coherence. The believability of all stories depends on the reliability of the characters, which involves not only the actors who are part of the story but also the narrator of the story. The issue of characterological coherence is critical, and clearly differentiates narrative rationality from traditional logics. Fisher explains:

Coherence in life and in literature requires that characters behave characteristically. Without this kind of predictability, there is no trust, no community, no rational human order. Applying this consideration of coherence is an inquiry into motivation. Its importance in deciding whether to accept a message cannot be overestimated. Determining a character's motives is prerequisite to trust, and trust is the foundation of belief.⁵³

Fisher's concept of characterological coherence overlaps, but is not identical with, Aristotle's category of *ethos* as one of the three means of persuasion. Aristotle identified three dimensions of *ethos*: practical wisdom (*phronesis*), virtue (*arete*), and goodwill (*eunoia*).⁵⁴ Since the 1950s, ethos-credibility research has emphasized credibility as a quality the audience attributes to a speaker.⁵⁵ One may have a high level of expertise and be completely trustworthy, but if the audience does not believe this to be true, one's ability to influence the audience will be severely limited by the lack of *perceived* credibility.

⁵² Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, 121.

⁵⁵ The dimensions of ethos-credibility identified in the early, extensive research of Hovland, Janis, and Kelly are *expertise* and *trustworthiness*. Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

Aristotle's understanding of *ethos* informs Fisher's notion of characterological coherence. Fisher broadens the concept, however, to include "a generalized perception of a person's fundamental value orientation. From this perception, one infers a person's probable decisions and actions, and determines the relationship of the person's orientation to one's own way of being in the world."⁵⁶ This assessment is critical to the determination of whether one makes positive or negative attributions to a person, and whether that person is defined as one's friend or one's foe. This assessment will determine the degree to which one identifies with the person telling the story and/or the person or person(s) who are characters within the story, thus affecting the degree to which the message is persuasive.

Fisher's emphasis on the significance of our assessment of another's motives is also informed by the work of Burke.⁵⁷ The term "motive" is used as a "name that characterizes the nature of a symbolic action in a given situation."⁵⁸ Working from the assumption that symbolic actions affect the life of the ideas and images people have in their minds, Fisher proposes that messages express one four motives: "(1) to give birth to—to gain acceptance of—ideas/images, *affirmation* [original emphasis]; (2) to revitalize or to reinforce ideas/images, *reaffirmation* [original emphasis]; (3) to heal or to

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Change (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 29ff.

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 144; Fisher is following Burke's definition. See Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 29ff.

s *Narration*, 148.

e is emphasized by the title of two of his major works, *A Motives*. See also his discussion of motive in *Permanence and*

cleanse ideas/images, *purification* [original emphasis]; and (4) to undermine or to discredit ideas/images, *subversion* [original emphasis].”⁵⁹

Although more than one motive may be present in any kind of symbolic action that is performed, one of the motives is always dominant.

Which motive dominates depends on the perception of the kind of symbolic action that is performed, how the discourse moves the mind toward assent, reassurance, corrected vision, or rejection. Whatever the motive of a message may be, its ultimate effect is to constitute or reconstitute listeners or readers as selves, to constitute or invoke the experience of community, and to shape the meaning of one’s world.⁶⁰

There may be a fifth motive that is quite different from the four identified above, each of which assumes that there are “true, healthy, sane ideas/images that should guide belief and action. However, there is also discourse that implies or asserts the impossibility or absurdity of life.” Such a motive occurs in what might be called a “rhetoric of evisceration,” in which a nihilistic vision is put forward.⁶¹

The issue of motive is a significant aspect of characterological coherence. Our assessment of what a person’s motives are will influence our interpretation of the way their current communication compares to their past stories and actions. As discussed earlier in relationship to the dynamics of identification, communication events are always influenced positively or negatively by past communication events. Influential past events may be linked because the same persons are involved, or the types of symbolic acts are the same although different characters are involved. The past events that most influence

⁵⁹ Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 144. See also Walter R. Fisher, “A Motive View of Communication,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 131-39.

⁶⁰ Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 145.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

the present may echo because the context was the same, such as a sermon during a time of community crisis, or the purpose of the present encounter may evoke the experiences of a past event in which one had the same purpose. To the extent that the same person is involved in the past events as in the present one, characterological coherence will be influenced by one's interpretation of the past events. Characterological, internal, and material coherence constitute the aspects of a story that are assessed within the category of narrative coherence.

Assessing narrative fidelity. In addition to narrative coherence, we also assess the narrative fidelity of the stories people tell us. This assessment involves the "logic of good reasons." The logic of good reasons reflects the claim that all symbolic exchanges involve moral inducements, values, some conception of "the good." The informal logic of good reasons emphasized within the narrative paradigm refers to the fact that people have a concept of the "good" that guides their response to the stories that they hear.⁶² We may disagree with another's sense of what the "good" is. Nevertheless, people respond as they do for "good reasons." They may be wrong, or even evil, but they are not irrational. A majority of the American population considers the white supremacist groups, which have gained attention as a result of the spate of recent murders in the United States, to be evil. However, by not quickly dismissing white supremacists as irrational, we will be in a better position to analyze what they found so persuasive about the stories of hatred and prejudice they heard and adopted as part of their own self-identity. Why did these stories

⁶² Ibid., 106-10.

have narrative fidelity and narrative coherence for them? There were competing stories being told in the society and in their local communities. Why were those stories not more persuasive? When we begin to pursue these questions, we have a chance to gain better insight into the dynamics that are spreading hatred and violence in our world today. We may also learn more effective ways of countering destructive stories.

Implications for communities of faith. One of the implications of the narrative paradigm is that it offers to communities of faith ways of assessing what is persuasive to them and why. By evaluating the adequacy of what we take to be good reasons, we develop practical wisdom. When people within a community of faith are able to articulate what counts as good reasons in their communal life, they are in a better position to “resolve exigencies by locating and activating values that go beyond the moment, making it possible that principles of decision or action can be generalized.”⁶³ Without thoughtful, critical reflection on the “good reasons” that inform our decisions and actions as a community of faith, we are more likely to act without thinking in terms of the stories and values that we have internalized from our society into our self-identity. Such stories and values may conflict in critical ways with the Christian values we affirm in worship and intentional educational events.

A second implication of the narrative paradigm for communities of faith is that it challenges the hierarchy built on the assumption that only people who are “experts,” those who have subject-matter expertise and can use the appropriate forms of argument, are

⁶³ Ibid., 94.

legitimate participants in discussing important issues that affect our lives. One of the implications of this challenge is that it supports the legitimacy of concerned Christians participating in public issues that have significant theological ramifications, such as the economy, ecology, treatment of the poor, and military policy.

One strategy for silencing critics of the government who call for adherence to values consistent with Christian faith is to deny the rationality of the critique because it comes from nonexperts – those who are not credentialed by the area of technical knowledge involved. Cobb argues, for example, that despite the claims of objective science that value-free research can provide guidance for public policy, economic theory entails values. Government policy derived from economic theory affects the quality of people's lives and the sustainability of the earth. Theologians have an important contribution to make to public discussions regarding economic policy. The economic claim that "primary devotion should be directed to the expansion of the economy" leads to disproportionate suffering on the part of those who are poor and threatens the sustainability of the earth and its resources.⁶⁴ Economic policy that fails to value each individual human being, other creatures, and the Earth itself, entails values that are not consistent with Christian faith. Therefore, such policy can and should be challenged.⁶⁵ The narrative paradigm provides support for Cobb's claim that economists should not be the only ones involved in setting economic policy. It also provides the specific categories of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity that need to be considered to increase

⁶⁴ Cobb, Earthist Challenge to Economism, 28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-35.

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competence in participating in public debate over government policy.

A third implication of the narrative paradigm is that it reminds us to pay attention to the wisdom of lay persons within the church, especially those with less formal education. Unless we are intentional about providing ways for people of all educational levels and ages to participate in church discussions and church governance, we will be unlikely to benefit from the wisdom of those who feel hesitant to speak in the presence of professionals in the congregation who are better educated. If we do not give careful attention to these processes, the church will reflect the hierarchy of status and authority that functions in the social reality of the surrounding culture.

Principles of Communication Viewed within the Narrative Paradigm

The narrative paradigm provides a philosophical perspective within which one can consider critical principles of communication that apply in all communication contexts. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to cover all the critical dimensions of the communication process. I am focusing on the following principles because they are essential for helping us understand the implicit, as well as the explicit, theology in communities of faith.

Communication as a Receiver Phenomenon

In an important sense, communication is a receiver phenomenon. Our relationships with others will be influenced by what others perceive us to have communicated, whether or not their perceptions match our intentions. If people believe we have insulted them, we must – if we are interested in creating and sustaining community – discover what it was about our verbal or nonverbal behavior that led them to that conclusion. If we sincerely

have no intention of insulting them, we then need to find ways to communicate that will not be perceived as insulting. To say simply that we did not mean for it to be insulting, so they should not be upset, is insufficient.

To communicate that we respect and value others, even when we disagree with them, we must understand the forms of verbal and nonverbal behavior that communicate that message to them. Because of the significant differences in family backgrounds and cultures, what communicates appreciation and respect in one culture, such as a friendly slap on the back or looking others directly in the eye, is perceived as an insult in other cultures. To understand the communication process, we need to recognize the profoundly contextual nature of meaning.

Reading a sermon without consideration of who will be preaching it, to what congregation, and within what historical context, does not provide enough information to allow us to evaluate the sermon. The sermon may involve appropriate exegesis, and the theology may be defensible; however, if the sermon includes language and references that a particular congregation cannot follow or understand, it would hardly make sense to say it was a good sermon as part of worship for that congregation. The preacher may have enjoyed preparing it and delivering it, but if the members of the congregation have no idea what the preacher said, they may feel they were being talked down to by someone who feels superior to them. Even if the preacher did not have that intention, the response of the congregation would be understandable and would influence future communication between congregants and the pastor.

Thinking about this principle within the context of the narrative paradigm leads us to consider the kinds of narratives that are being developed in a given congregation by the symbolic actions that occur during, before, and after worship and education events. The narratives involve far more than the intentional content of worship or Christian education. Thinking of communication as a receiver phenomenon reminds us that the persons initiating the symbolic acts do not have complete control of the narratives they are helping to create. The receivers, the audience members, are co-authors. Their perception of the intentional and unintentional symbolic acts may lead to narratives that are significantly different from the narrative the pastor or Christian educator had hoped to create.

The Permeable Boundaries of Communication Events

To gain insight into a local congregation, we need to consider the communication events that constitute the human dimension of congregational life as a whole. We often focus on a sermon, Christian education event, committee meeting, prayer group, pastoral care encounter, or informal conversation after a worship service as a discrete communication event. However, to gain a deeper insight into an individual communication event, we must think about it in relationship to the larger communication context in which it occurs.

All communication events have permeable boundaries and are, therefore, influenced by the larger contexts in which they occur. Communication events from the past, such as dinner with a parishioner at a restaurant, echo in formal communication events such as a sermon. The sermon, in turn, is echoed and distorted in the ocean of

communication into which it is dispersed.⁶⁶ Taking a broader view of the communication dynamics in a congregation allows us to explore the theological significance of the informal, as well as the formal, communication that occurs on a daily basis in the life of the community. The values entailed by the communication that occurs outside of worship disclose aspects of the lived theology of a congregation that either contribute to or detract from the narrative coherence and narrative fidelity of the theology proclaimed in worship.

People who are marginalized in our society have experienced betrayal throughout their lives by living in a nation that, while claiming commitment to “justice and liberty for all,” does not fulfill it. As a result, it takes time for relationships of trust to develop across lines of what Michael Welker refers to as humanly created unrighteous diversity within society.⁶⁷ When such relationships do develop, they are balm on the wounds of the body of Christ. If the balm is inauthentic and toxic, however, it can wound the body in new ways that may go even deeper than the initial wounds because the one inflicting the wound claimed to be one’s brother or sister in Christ.

I am under no illusion that human beings are capable of creating and sustaining

⁶⁶ The importance of recognizing the way our speech utterances are linked to past utterances through the conscious and unconscious assimilation of words of others is emphasized by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Bakhtin was committed to the Russian Orthodox Church, taught theology, and because of this was arrested under the regime of Stalin for corrupting youth. Due to his controversial status, Bakhtin published under friends’ names. He was rediscovered in the 1960s for his work on Dostoyevsky and Rabelais, and has had a significant influence on several disciplines, including communication theory. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). For the significance of Bakhtin’s influence on communication studies see Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery, Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).

⁶⁷ Welker, God the Spirit, 21-23.

perfect, healthy relationships with one other person, let alone with a large number of people in a community of faith. In fact, my point is to emphasize how difficult it is to develop a basically healthy community, which while far from perfect may be genuinely committed to working on just, righteous, and merciful relationships.

Because the boundaries of communication events, including worship, are always permeable, the society will influence the church, even within the heart of worship, whether we want it to or not. However, the more conscious we are of how such influence occurs, and the more willing we are to hold ourselves mutually accountable to our theological values, the more we will be able to discern the ways the Spirit is working among us and within us so that we can cooperate with, rather than resist, the changes that need to be made in the church.

As Whitehead makes clear, the past influences the present ontologically in ways that become only partially known in a conscious way. Wounds do not simply disappear because a certain amount of time has passed. In spite of a well-known saying, "time heals all wounds," time, in and of itself, is not sufficient for healing to take place. If wounds are to heal, they must be exposed so they can breathe and be cleansed. Keeping a serious wound heavily bandaged and untreated only ensures that the toxicity of the wound will seep ever deeper into the body, infecting and damaging the health of other parts of the body.

We are wise to take Paul's metaphor of the community of believers as the body of Christ quite seriously when thinking of what is required to treat the severe wounds, trauma, and lacerations we Christians have perpetrated on the body of Christ over the

centuries (1Cor. 12:27). Because of the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit, we have reason to believe that we can confess and repent of the poison of racism, sexism, and the other “isms” we human beings have generated to make unrighteous distinctions among ourselves and make real changes in the ways in which we relate to one another. Self-deception in claiming we have already rid ourselves of the toxins is an easier, albeit ultimately fatal, alternative.

Our habits of communication emerge from the social contexts that form us. Our social contexts are permeated by sin and brokenness. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf builds on the work of Marjorie Suchocki and Walter Wink in describing our social context as “a complex, transpersonal and systemic reality of evil which dominates, ensnares, and lures persons to dominate” and exclude others.⁶⁸ Volf argues that “the power of evil imposes itself . . . irresistibly through the operation of a transpersonal ‘system’ that is both ‘institutional’ and ‘spiritual.’ Caught in the system of exclusion as if in some invisible snare, people behave according to its perverted logic.”⁶⁹ This perverted logic finds its way into the stories we believe to be true, the habits of mind we nurture, and the habits of verbal and nonverbal communication in which we engage. As a result of the penetration of destructive narratives and the values they entail into the community of faith through the very lives and symbolic acts of the actors who constitute the community, the narratives that a local congregation embody are certain to be at odds with the theological narratives into which the church seeks to live. This tension between the

⁶⁸ Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 87. See Suchocki, The End of Evil; and Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁶⁹ Volf, 87.

church of faith and the church of experience, which has always existed,⁷⁰ must be addressed honestly and directly to prevent it from threatening the structural, material, and characterological coherence of the Christian narrative.

We need to acknowledge that, as individuals and as communities of faith, we embody destructive habits of thought, word, and action that contradict the theology we proclaim. Recognizing the importance of our habits of communication in influencing others and in reinforcing or contradicting our theology is a first step in helping us to take responsibility for our communication and destructive habits. We cannot do this alone, however. Our self-identity, distorted as it may be, develops through what others see and reflect back to us. In a loving, faithful church, it should be possible for people to learn to see themselves – their gifts, their self-deceptions, and their true and undiminishable value as a children of God – more accurately.

When we explore the ways a community of faith influences Christian self-identity, we must consider not only the explicit theology that is embodied in worship and Christian education events, but also the implicit theology that emerges through all the communication events constituting the human dimension of the life of the congregation. In The Church in the Power of the Spirit, Jürgen Moltmann argues for the ecclesiological significance of interpersonal communication. Making his claim in the context of a vision of the church of Jesus Christ that emerges from a reinterpretation of the traditional three offices of Christ -- the priestly, prophetic, and royal offices – he emphasizes the necessity of always holding them in relationship to one another. Theologically and historically, he argues, distortions

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 20-28.

occur when one has been emphasized without the qualifying influence of the other two. In addition, he lifts up the importance of Jesus' identification of himself as our friend as the horizon within which the other three need to be considered.⁷¹ When the three offices of Christ are considered as interdependent aspects that are qualified by Jesus' identification of himself as our friend, they contribute to a significantly different narrative than would a theological perspective that emphasized only one of the offices of Christ, or set aside his proclamation of friendship.

Moltmann seeks to strengthen our understanding of friendship by emphasizing its public, rather than only its private, meaning. In the friendship of a trusted, loyal friend, real freedom becomes possible. Through the friendship Christ offers us, we can gain the perspective, self-identity, freedom, and courage to be a trusted, loyal friend to others, to those within and those outside our particular community of faith. Moltmann argues for a vision of the church in which it extends such friendship to all the world. Where such friendship is offered, the priesthood of believers can embody the three offices of Christ in ways that serve Christ's mission.

If the church is to “reflect and represent the lordship of Christ in itself,” then “it cannot adopt its social order from the way in which the society in which it lives is run, or allow its social order to be determined by that.”⁷² Thus, the church is called to critical self-examination of the ways in which women and men of different races, ethnicities, economic classes, and sexual orientation are treated within the church. “In the church of Christ the

⁷¹ Ibid., 107.

⁷² Ibid., 106.

religious, economic and sexual privileges that obtain in the world around lose their force. But if they lose their force and their validity, then another power holds sway – the power of the Spirit.” The church is “in principle the community of equals, equipped with equal rights and equal dignity.”⁷³

The church is called on to recognize the diverse gifts the Spirit gives people for ministry in order to honor the priesthood of all believers. The church then, for Moltmann, is a “council of believers. . . the common way – of the liberated. The social realization of these ideas is a continual problem and a continual opportunity.”⁷⁴ Within the context of this discussion, Moltmann argues that

the church of Christ must present itself as a ‘derestricted area’ amid the restrictions imposed by society. Schleiermacher meant by this a fellowship without an ulterior purpose; modern writers mean communication without repression. A ‘liberated zone’ of this kind in society would certainly fulfil that unfulfilled promise of the French revolution - ‘fraternity.’ The problem is that this ‘fraternity’ cannot exist without ‘liberty’ and ‘equality.’ *The idea becomes illusory when it overlooks these presuppositions for unrestricted communication, or simply assumes that they exist* (emphasis mine).⁷⁵

Moltmann refers to Habermas’s theory of communication in this quotation. Although I do not think Habermas’s approach offers adequate insight into the process of communication within communities, I believe that Moltmann is right in arguing that to be the church of Christ, the church must constantly seek to be a “liberated zone” within which fellowship occurs without ulterior motives and relationships embody liberty and equality as understood

⁷³ Ibid., 106.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 107.

within the context of Christian faith.

The late modern society of the United States preaches a doctrine of liberation through wealth and moves only grudgingly toward the political and legal equality of all people. From a Christian perspective, the truth of our freedom and equality emerges from our freedom and equality in Christ. That theological claim provides the warrant for challenging social, political, and economic forces that ignore the inherent value of each human being and treat the earth as nothing more than a resource to be consumed for the fulfillment of our immediate needs and desires.

The Dynamic Reality of Communication

The social reality of every community of faith and human institution is constituted by an ongoing, only partially controllable flow of manifold communication events. As people change, as some members of the community leave and new people become involved, the communication dynamics may change in radical ways in a very short period of time. If the change is sustained, the social reality of the institution changes, for better or worse. The social reality is disclosed in the informal narratives that are told by those who participate in or are influenced by the institution. Such narratives suggest the kinds of characters, the qualities and motivations of the acts, and the attributes of the scenes that constitute the narrative reality of an institution during a given period of time.

Communities that are intent on creating and sustaining the quality of communication Moltmann describes must realize that regardless of their progress, they must stay vigilant. A healthy, dynamic community in which equality and liberty express with a high degree of ease for all members of the community must be persistently

monitored in order to respond in a timely and constructive way to breakdowns in the values the community seeks to embody.

This self-monitoring has nothing to do with the currently popular label “political correctness.” From a theological perspective, the widespread use of this label is very troubling. When people claim that messages that respect the value and rights of people who are marginalized and oppressed within society are constructed merely to be “politically correct,” they are identifying the message as a particular kind of speech act.⁷⁶ The term “speech act” refers to a communicative utterance. Following Bakhtin, an utterance is not “a conventional unit,” such as a group of words defined grammatically as a sentence. Rather, an utterance is a “real unit.”⁷⁷ When one person stops speaking and another one begins, a new utterance begins. After assessing the communicative intent of an utterance within the context of the communication event in which it occurs, one can then label the utterance as a particular type of speech act: a promise, sermon, joke, greeting, insult, or lecture.

If a speech act is identified as an act of “political correctness,” it suggests that the words are not sincere. If a pastor asks members of a congregation not to use derogatory, insulting names to refer to people of different races, ethnicities, or nationalities, one must decide if the pastor’s request is a sincere effort to help people not devalue other human

⁷⁶ The importance of analyzing speech acts within the context of communication episodes is supported by the work of rhetoricians Thomas Frentz and Thomas Farrell. See, for example, Frentz and Farrell, “The Language Action Paradigm.”

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 71. In challenging linguistic theories, Bakhtin argued that “the lack of a well-developed theory of the utterance as a unit of speech communication leads to an imprecise distinction between the sentence and the utterance, and frequently to a complete confusion of the two.”

beings. If the pastor's message is identified as a speech act of political correctness, this would suggest that rather than being a message that expresses an important theological value, the pastor is concerned only with appearances. It implies that the pastor wants others to *think* he or she – and the congregation -- are concerned about people who are of different backgrounds, although they really are not. Theologically, this is a very destructive conclusion.

A few years ago, I helped create a survey for a seminary community in which we asked faculty, students, and administrators to answer several questions to help us assess what the term “spirituality” meant to them. One of the questions asked people to indicate what people on campus have played a role in supporting their spiritual lives. A number of categories of people were identified by occupation in an effort to include all the people who are regularly present on campus. Because a student had frequently experienced spiritual support from a person who worked with the grounds crew, she requested that we include the category “custodial staff and grounds crew” on the survey. On one of the completed surveys, a student wrote next to that option, “You had to be politically correct, didn't you?”

The implication is that we only included the custodial staff and grounds crew because it made it look like we would honor the spiritual maturity of people who probably do not have the formal education in theology that many on campus have. By labeling the inclusion of the custodial staff and grounds crew as a speech act of “political correctness,” the student's comment dismissed the possibility that any of these people

might provide spiritual support for others, so that including them must have been insincere.

When church leaders hold themselves, the church, and society accountable for embodying just, righteous, merciful relationships, which necessarily involves communicating in ways that contribute to such relationships, the theological grounding of their position is discounted if they are dismissed as calling for speech acts of political correctness in the church or society. Concern for how we communicate with others and how communication affects people has nothing to do with being politically correct. It has everything to do with striving faithfully to express and live one's theology.

Most people do not realize what a destructive habit we have formed in this society by labeling any speech act that expresses concern for the rights and communication preferences of those with less power as mere attempts at political correctness. It is my hope that leaders within the church and in seminaries will quit using the term, in order to discourage its continued use in a way that dismisses the theological legitimacy of concern for people who are not in positions of power and authority.

The point of including an analysis of the term "political correctness" in a discussion of the dynamic quality of communities is that the ways in which we talk to and about one another influence the degree of trust in a community. Trust, which is at the heart of community, is a dynamic variable. It is far easier to destroy than it is to create. It often takes a long time to have enough experiences with another person to realize that one can trust them. Trust develops as a result of allowing oneself to be vulnerable to another and finding in the process that the person does not violate or take advantage of that

vulnerability. A number of such experiences lead to a feeling of ease and openness with another. If the person then betrays us, it may take a very long time for trust to develop again, if it ever does.

This does not mean that we do not forgive the person and love him or her. We can forgive someone of a past betrayal without putting ourselves in a position to let the person betray us again. If the need for such caution in a particular community is great, it diminishes the strength and vitality of the community. Communities of faith that are committed to developing vital, healthy relationships characterized by equality and mutual respect, but that exist in the midst of a society with a long history of destructive relationships based on racial, gender, and economic differences, must not underestimate the difficulties of creating and sustaining a community based on a different set of values.

One Cannot *Not* Communicate

In developing the axiom of communication, “One cannot *not* communicate,” family systems theorists Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson point to an aspect of behavior that is often overlooked: “behavior has no opposite . . . [O]ne cannot *not* [original emphasis] behave.”⁷⁸ If it follows, as communication theorists believe it does, that all behavior has message value, then any verbal or nonverbal behavior in which a person engages may be evaluated by an observer as an act of communication. The criterion for determining whether or not communication has occurred is whether or the person who perceives another’s behavior attributes meaning to it. The attributed meaning

⁷⁸ This is the first of five axioms of communication central to their work. See Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson, The Pragmatics of Human Communication (New York: Norton, 1967), 67. Communication scholars continue to affirm this axiom as a central tenet of human communication theory.

may be inaccurate. However, if it influences the way the perceiver thinks about and/or acts toward the individual in a significant way, it will affect future intentional communication between the two. The point Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson stress is that when we are in the presence of another person, we cannot *not* communicate.

The significance of this axiom was illustrated during Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent trip to the Middle East at the invitation of Leah Rabin, the wife of the slain Israeli prime minister, Yitzak Rabin. Announcing that she was traveling in her role as First Lady, and not in her role as a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate seat from New York, Mrs. Clinton believed it was important to balance her visit at the Western Wall by visiting Suha Arafat, wife of Yasir Arafat, in Ramallah in the Arab-controlled West Bank.

While sitting in front of a live audience and television cameras, Mrs. Clinton looked on as Suha Arafat accused the Israeli security forces of routinely using carcinogenic gases in Gaza and the West Bank to control crowds, leading to an increase in cancer among women and children in those areas. Because of the significance and sensitivity of the peace negotiations being conducted between the Palestinians and Israelis and the significance of Jewish constituents in the New York senate race, the first lady was caught in a double bind. Anything she did in response to Mrs. Arafat's accusations would offend important segments of the various audiences that had access to Mrs. Clinton's nonverbal response to the comments.

Mrs. Clinton's dilemma illustrates the significance of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's first axiom. The one thing Mrs. Clinton could *not* do – as she sat in full view of the audience and television cameras – was *not* communicate. The network coverage of

the event showed her looking at Mrs. Arafat very seriously and without moving. Aides of another contender for the New York Senate seat, Mayor Rudolph Guiliani, chided Mrs. Clinton "for not confronting Mrs. Arafat."⁷⁹ Other Democrats did not press her for sitting silently so much as for going to the West Bank at all, and taking 12 hours to respond to Suha Arafat's remarks.⁸⁰ Mrs. Clinton offered reasons for going to the West Bank, for sitting silently, and for waiting 12 hours to respond; nevertheless, critics may choose to ignore her explanations in favor of their own interpretations. Mrs. Clinton could not *not* communicate in the very awkward situation in which she found herself. She also could not control the attributions others made about her verbal and nonverbal behavior, regardless of the thoroughness and honesty of her own explanations.

The axiom one cannot *not* communicate is important to keep in mind whenever we are in the presence of other people, whether at worship, walking through the halls of the church, in committee meetings, at informal gatherings, or at lunch. If other people attribute meaning to our verbal and/or nonverbal behavior, even when we are unaware of their presence, we have communicated in a way that may have consequences for our future interaction with that person. The seriousness of misunderstandings that can occur are increased within a community in which there is a low level of trust or a history of inequality.

When a community exists within the context of a communication climate that involves a history of racism and sexism, which would be the case in almost every

⁷⁹ William A. Orme, Jr., "While Mrs. Clinton Looks On, Palestinian Officials Criticize Israel," New York Times, 12 Nov. 1999, on-line, available from www.NYTimes.com.

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community in the United States, the energy flows from communication experiences across the years in the larger context permeate current communication events and influence people's perceptions and interpretations of one another. Realistic acknowledgment of this reality is necessary if trust is to be established and relationships of equality and mutuality are to emerge and be sustained. Suggesting that we overcome the destructive history of racism and sexism within our society and within the church by setting it aside and starting fresh is not an option. Communication in the present does not occur in a vacuum.

The axiom illustrated by the controversy surrounding Mrs. Clinton's silence is that when we are in the presence of others, we cannot *not* communicate. Acknowledging this dynamic within the church can lead people to talk with one another about the ways they interpret each other's verbal and nonverbal behavior in order to reduce conflicts that arise from misperceptions. As simple as this process sounds, however, it requires a degree of trust to participate in the process if the one who is disturbed by the communication has less power or status within the community than the one to whom she or he would be speaking. Immediately the systems of domination within the society begin to complicate the possibility for creating healthy communication within the church.

One of the important implications of this axiom is that communication is not limited to our intentional behavior, or to our verbal behavior. In many cases, our nonverbal communication is particularly critical. Nonverbal communication includes "posture, gesture, facial expression, voice inflection, the sequence, rhythm, and cadence

⁸⁰ Adam Nagourney, "First Lady's Campaign Worries," New York Times, 13 Nov. 1999, on-line,

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of the words themselves, and any other nonverbal manifestation of which the organism is capable, as well as the communicational clues unfailingly present in any *context* [original emphasis] in which an interaction takes place."⁸¹ When our verbal behavior and our nonverbal behavior conflict – we say we like a person's idea very much, but there is no energy in our voice and no positive expression on our face – people tend to trust our nonverbal behavior, with all its ambiguity, rather than our verbal behavior. This sets up unlimited possibilities for misunderstanding for several reasons. First, we are not fully conscious of the ways in which we communicate nonverbally – we never see our own face in the middle of a conversation, for example, unless we review a videotape of the conversation. Secondly, nonverbal communication is not universal – a smile looks the same in different cultures, but in some cultures it signals anger rather than a positive emotion. Finally, our response to some aspect of another person's nonverbal behavior may trigger a negative reaction in us even when we are unable to identify the specific behavior that is triggering the negative response. Any effort to understand the communication dynamics within a community of faith must involve careful attention to the nonverbal aspects of communication.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the communication process, we are wise to assume that whenever we have tried to communicate with others, we have been misunderstood, to at least some degree. Making such an assumption will increase our sensitivity to any

form

available from www.NYTimes.com.

⁸¹Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 62.

indications of what the misunderstanding might involve. Approaching communication in this way within a community can help us to develop processes for checking out our communication with others in efforts to reduce the frequency and severity of misunderstandings. The assumption that attempted communication has been partially misunderstood should be applied to all communication in the church: sermons, educational events, session meetings, staff relations, community outreach, teacher training, committee meetings, youth group, mission trips, and potluck suppers. Communication problems in any of these areas can affect relationships among people, thereby spilling over into other contexts. Whenever and wherever members of a community of faith communicate with one another, dynamics occur that contribute or detract from the vitality and health of the community as a whole.

The perspectives on communication, self-identity, and community presented in this chapter support my thesis that the life-long process of developing and sustaining a Christian self-identity occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of intentional and unintentional communication events that are constituted by both verbal and nonverbal messages. It is my contention that understanding and applying these aspects of communication will contribute to our work as practical theologians. In the next chapter, I develop these contributions, with particular focus on Christian education and homiletics.

CHAPTER 4

The Multiple Forms of Education in a Community of Faith

To review the argument of the dissertation thus far, it is my contention that our conscious human responses to the work of the Spirit are influenced significantly by our self-identity. Because of the sociological and technological changes that have occurred in the last few decades in late modern societies such as the United States, the factors influencing self-identity have become far more complex. It is important, therefore, that practical theologians reflect critically on the changes in the phenomena that influence self-identity in order that we might better understand ways to nurture and sustain vital, mature, and strong self-identities rooted in the God of Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 1, I sketched the challenging situation in which we find ourselves as practical theologians in the United States: the geometric increase in sources and amount of available information, the influence of deconstructive postmodern thought, and the unrelenting demands for greater degrees of cognitive complexity in nearly every realm of life. All of these issues have the potential to influence our self-identities.

In Chapter 2, I presented aspects of the biblical worldview in which the transcendent God, who is the source of life and the source of freedom, is intimately engaged in the world. This biblical way of narrating the story of existence has no basis in reality according to the mindset of late modern philosophy and science, which rejects any possibility of the sacred. Most late modern philosophers affirm some form of determinism, which leads to the rejection of human freedom as well.

Having discussed the late modern worldview, I presented John Cobb's constructive postmodern theology, which challenges directly the presuppositions of the late modern worldview. After exposing those presuppositions as inadequate, Cobb provides a theology that, besides being philosophically intelligible, and scientifically defensible, also affirms the biblical vision of the immanent Spirit of the transcendent God as a vital ontological reality that creates, sustains, and transforms the world and makes human freedom possible. The aims that God offers us in the ongoing process of our becomingness make it possible for us to creatively transform both our self-identity and our relations with one another and creation itself in ways that more fully express God's vision for the world. Because the Spirit works persuasively rather than coercively, our acknowledgment of the reality of Spirit and our conscious responsiveness to the Spirit's guidance in our lives and in the world make a difference.

A primary way in which we influence one another, including one another's self-identities, is through our verbal and nonverbal communication. In chapter three, I argued that the life-long process of developing and sustaining a Christian self-identity occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of intentional and unintentional communication events that are constituted by both verbal and nonverbal messages. I explored the implications of Walter Fisher's theory of rhetoric, which emphasizes the narrative qualities of all human communication and claims that human beings respond intuitively to the narrative coherence and the narrative fidelity of "stories" that are offered for their adherence. In order to think critically about self-identity and communities of

faith, it is important to take into account the implicit theology that is borne by the various dimensions of communication that constitute the social reality of the community of faith.

On the basis of the issues discussed thus far, this chapter argues that a theology that affirms the immanence of the Spirit of God and the fundamental relationality of existence calls for an integrated, multifaceted approach to Christian education that incorporates concern for Christian self-identity, the conflicting forces of late modernity, and the dynamics of human communication into a model of educational ministry that consciously lifts up the multiplicity of intentional and unintentional ways that congregations educate.

I concur with Maria Harris that the curriculum of Christian education includes “the entire course of the church’s life.”¹ Harris identifies the forms of the church curriculum as *kerygma*, proclaiming the good news of the gospel; *didache*, the formal practice of teaching; *leiturgia*, the corporate worship and prayer life; *koinonia*, the life of people in community; and *diakonia*, the ministry of service within the community and to the world. To these I would add *economia*, the administration of the church.² In analyzing the curriculum of *kerygma*, *didache*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *economia*, we need to consider what Elliot Eisner refers to as the explicit, implicit, and null curricula that are taught by the community of faith.³

Whereas the explicit curriculum involves intentional, articulated pedagogical

¹ Harris, 17.

² I have been influenced in my thinking about *economia* as a sixth form of education as a result of personal conversations with Christian educator Frank Rogers.

³ Eisner, 87-107.

goals and content, the implicit curriculum is what is taught covertly through, for example, the types of illustrations used in teaching, preaching, and discussions, the ways time, space, and money are allocated, and the roles women and men of different ages, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic status play in worship, governance, and other formal and informal contexts within the life of the church. The unarticulated communication rules that emerge in the different contexts in which people regularly gather are also part of the implicit curriculum.⁴

The null curriculum refers to what is left out of the curriculum, that which teaches by its absence.⁵ In too many communities of faith, the history of Christian contributions to anti-Semitism through the centuries culminating in the Holocaust, and the articulation of a theology that affirms faith in Jesus Christ while honoring the ongoing legitimacy of the Jewish covenant with God, are part of the null curriculum. Recognition of Christian contributions to anti-Semitism and the theological viability of Judaism, as well as other religious traditions, is reflected in the official position of many denominations. However, if this recognition is never articulated in the preaching and teaching of local congregations or in the printed and visual materials that serve as resources for the formal educational effort of a congregation, it is an aspect of the null curriculum. It is important to look for the explicit, the implicit, and the null curricula in each of the forms of church life.

⁴ Susan B. Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980). I discuss communication rules later in this chapter.

⁵ Eisner, 97-107.

All the forms of church life educate, and each form relies on verbal and nonverbal communication for its embodiment. Thus, in the concrete reality of each local congregation, the details of intentional and unintentional communication – in all the varied verbal and nonverbal forms in which communication occurs – are significant *theologically*. In the inextricable blending of content and form, the various dimensions of communication – the one who generates the message, the content of the message, the medium through which it is communicated, the one who perceives it, and the context in which it occurs – are all part of a whole. The meaning of any one aspect of the whole cannot be understood if it is considered in isolation from the other aspects. The ontological relationality of Cobb's theology reinforces the importance of communication in all the aspects of community life.

Relationality in Communities of Faith

Cobb's vision of reality, which was discussed in Chapter 2, emphasizes the ontological relationality of existence. We human beings, like the rest of nature, consist of continually emerging events involved in a process of creativity that we and other entities embody. In this process, we are continually receiving aims from God that present us with the best possible way of creatively blending our prehensions of the past with the new possibilities that God offers us. Because the new possibilities God invites us to embrace are not merely products of our own imagination, or of our past, and are not limited by the

boundaries of our linguistic world, there is the potential for real freedom from the constraints of the past.⁶

In the creative process of reality, the Spirit of God is the source of life, the source of freedom, and the source of transformation. Through this creative process in which the Spirit is involved, we are internally related to one another and to creation. We are part of the organic connectedness of existence whether we are aware of it or not. The connections cannot be broken, but they can be poisoned. In each moment of our existence, we are contributing influences that extend far beyond ourselves.

Considering a community of faith within the context of this dynamic ontology discloses the genetic relationship between the individuals who constitute the community of faith and the community as a whole. The occasions of experience that constitute our human existence are open many times a second for influence through our prehensions of the past. If a person becomes involved in a vibrant community of faith, over time the person will be influenced by the community. This influence does not occur only through processes of enculturation, however.⁷ It also occurs because of the work of the Spirit within and among every individual within the community.

⁶ Cobb, *God and the World*, 54-55. For my discussion of Cobb's conception of the call forward, and of the distinctions between Cobb's perspective and that of John Dewey and Henry Nelson Wieman, see Chapter 2.

⁷ Enculturation models of Christian education, such as the "community of faith-enculturation paradigm" offered by John Westerhoff, point to important ways in which Christian self-identity is formed through the lived experience of the community. Westerhoff's work provides important insights. He does not, however, acknowledge the importance of setting in place processes that will encourage ongoing, constructive self-evaluation and self-criticism within the community. Without such processes in place, the emphasis on enculturation can lead to a repression and marginalization of those who hold minority opinions. It is also important to deal explicitly with the ways in which our enculturation in the processes of the larger culture in which the congregation is embedded, inevitably influences the perspectives and values held by those within the church. This reality also points to the need for processes that will help to reduce

From the perspective of a relational ontology, the notion that there are boundaries that should – or could – keep the practices of *kerygma*, *didache*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *economia* from influencing one another dissolves in the light of the awareness that we embody within us the influences of one event even as we are engaged in another. Further, the Spirit of God is present in every formal and informal gathering. Worship, coffee hour, finance committee, youth group, outreach mission, church potluck and Bible study – to give but a few examples – all educate in intentional and unintentional ways. All provide contexts in which the Spirit is present, calling us forward into the individual and corporate life God envisions for us.

The immanence of the Spirit of God in Cobb's theology is particularly important to keep in mind when we talk about all the ways in which the life of the community of faith educates. Calvin, who frequently referred to the Spirit as the real teacher, the "schoolmaster,"⁸ emphasized that the Spirit teaches through scripture, but also through nature, in our hearts, and in the church. Moltmann, too, lifts up this theme when he argues that

[t]he efficacies of the Spirit reach beyond the Word. Nor do the experiences of the Spirit find expression in words alone. They are as multifarious and protean as sensory reality itself. The Spirit has its non-verbal expressions too. The indwelling of the Spirit 'in our hearts' goes deeper than the conscious level in us. It rouses all our senses, permeates the unconscious too, and quickens the body, giving it new life (I Cor. 6: 19f). A new energy for living proceeds from the Spirit. To bind the experience of the Spirit solely to the Word is one-sided and represses these dimensions. The non-verbal dimensions for their part show that the Word is bound to the Spirit, but that the Spirit is not bound to the Word.⁹

the degree of self-deception in the community. See, for example, John H. Westerhoff, III, Will Our Children Have Faith? (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

⁸ See, for example, John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2:876-77.

⁹ Moltmann, Spirit of Life.

Because of the ways we apprehend the past in each moment of existence, the past, including the work of the Spirit in the past, is carried forward into the present. The experiences we have within the various contexts of the church are also carried forward in ways that influence the present. Experiences within the curriculum of *koinonia* influence our experience within the curriculum of *leiturgia*, as well as the other forms through which the church educates. The Holy Spirit is the teacher in every context, but the Spirit does not work by eliminating our past and any influence it might have on the present. If that happened, there would be no continuity whatsoever in our existence. We are transformed by the Spirit, not obliterated.

Reality, including human existence, is constituted by occasions of experience. Just as we are not static, communities of faith are not static either. Stalwart members of the church die or move away, life situations of members change, relationships among individuals and groups within the community sour or blossom, the pastors retire, new families become active in the church, and/or the demographics of the larger community in which the church is embedded change. The changes that continually occur, whether we want them to or not, influence the self-identity and vitality of the community of faith. Developing and maintaining a sensitivity to the changing dynamics within a community of faith is an important task for church leaders to consider on an ongoing basis. Small groups are one of the critical dimensions of every local congregation that need to be considered carefully in order to monitor changing dynamics in a congregation and to understand the theology a community of faith embodies.

Small Groups in the Church

Regardless of whether a given church has what it calls a small group ministry, a congregation of any size almost always has within it a number of formal and informal small groups that gather regularly. Given the ontological relationality of existence, such groups contribute to the tone and character of the congregation whether the group is considered important in terms of organizational structure or not. Each group also contributes to some degree to the lived theology of the community of faith taken as a whole.

Organizational theorist Karl Weick maintains that all organizations are constituted by groups of small groups.¹⁰ Even if there were only 30 people in a congregation, it is unlikely that they would plan worship, education, mission, and take care of the administration of the church as a body of the whole. Even small organizations break into small groups to carry out their various functions. To understand any organization, Weick contends, one must understand how the small groups function and the nature of the communication links that exist among them. Weick's thesis can be taken to an even deeper level if, besides analyzing explicit communication links, we also analyze the ontological connectedness that exists within and among groups in any organization. A congregation of any size can be analyzed at both of these levels in terms of the formal and informal small groups that study the Bible together, manage the business of the church, plan the programs, prepare for worship, gather for prayer and mutual support, or meet for casual conversation regularly. Each of the groups plays a role in creating, nurturing, or harming the dynamic

¹⁰ Karl E. Weick, The Social Psychology of Organizing (Reading, Pa.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1969).

processes that constitute the community of faith.

National Small Group Movement

Because of the dynamic growth of the small group movement throughout the country, many congregations have become more conscious of and interested in developing small group ministries. The small group movement nationally is, itself, part of the context that is influencing the life of local congregations in a variety of ways. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that small groups, which are present throughout the country, are generating important changes in society.

The degree to which small groups have emerged throughout the United States is significant. According to Wuthnow's extensive 3-year study, forty percent of the adults (age 18 and older) in the United States identify themselves as members of at least one small group that "meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it."¹¹ Participation in small groups remains nearly the same in all regions of the country, among both rural and urban populations, and within all economic classes and ethnic groups. This means that approximately 75 million people seek conversation and support by meeting regularly in small groups such as Bible studies, Sunday School classes, prayer groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, interest groups, and groups dedicated to helping single parents or divorcees. Based on the data collected, Wuthnow and his associates estimate that there are about 3 million groups functioning currently, which means one group for approximately every 80 people in the continental United States.¹² Because these groups are functioning

¹¹ Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey, 45.

¹² Ibid., 45-46.

throughout every region of the country, in a town with a population of around 50,000 people, it is estimated that there are at least 600 small groups functioning at any given time.¹³

Wuthnow argues that profound sociological changes are being spawned by participants in these small groups. He sees these changes reflected in two significant issues: our understanding of community and our interpretation of the sacred.

Changing concept of community. Nearly everyone in the United States claims to want community desperately, but most have trouble finding it. Small groups are helping fill this need. The kind of community they offer, however, is significantly different from communities of the past, which were based primarily on families, neighborhoods, and ethnic groups. These new communities "do not share the imagined heritage, destiny, or physical traits and personality characteristics that unite individuals who are related by blood."¹⁴ The long periods of economic responsibility for others is not present. The physical parameters that defined neighborhoods or tribes made it impossible to be a member of more than one neighborhood or one tribe. Small groups, by contrast, are far less structured in terms of physical proximity, and are "decidedly more purposive, intentional, and voluntaristic."¹⁵ This fact leads to a sense of community over which the individual has far more control. The dependence on the group is much more likely to be limited to

¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

emotional care, as distinct from physical or economic support, and even the emotional support may be given quite sporadically.¹⁶

Through involvement in small groups, our self-identity may come to reflect groups we choose to associate with far more than groups defined by our birth or geographical location. While small groups reflect this change in American society, it must also be pointed out that the small group movement reinforces and sustains the change.

There are many positive effects of small groups. If people move to another part of the country, they can – rather than becoming part of the community only after months, or years, if ever – immediately seek out and establish membership in a small group focused on some personal interest or need. Thus the widespread availability of diverse groups in all communities provides a healthy counter-influence to the isolation of individuals in our mobile society.

While there are positive aspects to this counter-influence to isolation, there are negative aspects as well. Because small groups are chosen intentionally, the explicit as well as the implicit group rules and values must be such that the person's individual needs are met to a significant degree. Otherwise, these persons will be likely to leave the groups and move on to groups in which their values and preferences are dominant. As a result, the form of community that is sustained by small groups allows for strong individualism. While this is not necessarily a negative attribute, it does make it difficult for a community to encourage commitments to values that challenge us. These commitments, such as striving

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

to live a just life, may lead to internal dissonance that we could minimize or avoid if we could leave the group and move to a group that does not emphasize such a commitment.

Although some rules for communicating in a group may be discussed explicitly, over time, in any case, *unarticulated* communication rules emerge in all groups.

Communication theorist Susan Shimanoff defines a communication rule as a “followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain situations.”¹⁷ Despite the fact that they may never be articulated explicitly, rules have prescriptive force, which pressures us to communicate in certain ways rather than others in a particular context. The unspoken rules relate to such issues as *who* can say *what* to *whom* for *how long*, where and how people should sit or stand, appropriate ways to handle time and space, and the parameters of appropriate eye contact and touch in a particular situation. Communication rules – such as the group never starts until the pastor arrives – are functioning when one observes repetitive patterns of behavior that if violated, lead to some form of verbal or nonverbal sanction. One may not be able to observe a sanction. For example, if a rule violation simply leads one to think less of someone, the private negative judgment is a type of sanction.¹⁸ Patterns of behavior that can be violated without incurring a sanction, such as a person always wearing clothing of a particular color, are the result of habits rather than rule-guided choices.

Although Wuthnow does not analyze his data specifically in terms of communication rules, his descriptions of the behavior in groups can be analyzed in terms of

¹⁷ Shimanoff, *Communication Rules*, 57.

¹⁸ Shimanoff discusses several types of negative sanctions in *Communication Rules*, 94-101.

Shimanoff's theory. The unspoken communication rules in the small groups Wuthnow studied encourage group conversation that protects individual preferences. In most groups, for example, emotional support is defined to mean encouragement in distinction from not only criticism but also guidance. Group members tell one another they are okay, but refrain from offering each other constructive advice. Wuthnow believes that an uncritical tolerance of diversity is championed in the ideology of most small groups. As a result, caring for others is likely to be understood as avoiding criticizing them rather than trying to help them come to a different understanding.

Wuthnow contends that people generally choose groups on the basis of what they can get out of them. The group itself may function more as a context in which each individual comes to think about himself or herself rather than as a context in which genuine concern about others is emphasized. Even to suggest that individual personal needs be put in a secondary place runs against the ideology of many groups, according to Wuthnow.¹⁹

When there is conflict within a group, it is easier to leave the group rather than confront fellow group members. This puts pressure on the group to repress conflict. It is also true, however, that such group dynamics place a different degree of responsibility on the individual group member. A person cannot so easily blame the fate of his or her birth for leading one to be in the group. Each individual has to decide whether s/he really wants to be involved, and whether the group really is worthwhile. This encourages people to listen to their own feelings, a perspective highly valued by the small group movement. In a

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

curious way, then, the problems reinforced by group involvement, such as emphasis on the individual rather than long-term, enduring relationships in community, are the same problems groups were formed to overcome.²⁰

Wuthnow emphasizes the importance of these considerations because "the basic fabric of society depends on how individuals structure their relationships with one another Community always lies at the intersection of individual needs and institutional structures."²¹ Wuthnow concludes that while the support people experience in small groups is very positive, the weakness of many small groups lies in the fact that they do not provide an environment for forging enduring bonds and creating community in any more than a very shallow sense of the term. Nor do they actually serve to resist the increasing fragmentation of society.

Changing concept of the sacred. In addition to changing the way people understand the term "community," participation in small groups is also changing the understanding of the sacred. Given the growing interest in spirituality in the United States and the extent to which many groups explicitly deal with spirituality in some sense, it has been argued that the strength of the small group movement has developed, at least in part, because the churches are weak. The argument is that people are not finding the guidance they seek in church; thus, the small group movement is credited with providing a way of "revitalizing American religion, stemming the tide of secularity, and drawing the faithful back to God before the churches slide into oblivion."²²

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 6.

Wuthnow argues that this standard response to the question of why the small group movement is so strong is wrong on two counts. In the first place, Wuthnow argues, the small group movement in the United States is flourishing not because the churches are weak, but because they are strong. Eighty percent of all small groups are associated with a church or synagogue.²³

Wuthnow's point is that churches and synagogues play an important role in providing space for groups to meet and informing people about the availability of groups, thus serving a type of legitimizing function. However, when Wuthnow claims that churches are strong, based on these data, he is referring to strength in terms of the function of the churches within the social structure of society. While this is a legitimate way to talk about the strength of the church in the United States sociologically, it does not address the issue of the theological and moral strength and vitality in the church.

The second mistake made by those who hold the standard view of the small group movement, according to Wuthnow, is the assumption that small groups are serving to stem the tide of secularity in the United States. Believing this view not to be supported by the data, Wuthnow points to the fact that while a large number of groups encourage people to pray and to think about spiritual truths, the groups contribute little to group members' knowledge of the Bible.²⁴ Most of the groups do not assert the value of traditional theological understandings associated with different Christian or Jewish perspectives of the past. Instead, many groups encourage a more subjective and pragmatic approach to faith.

²³ Ibid., 6-7.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

He found that the emphasis in small groups is on God as a God of "love, comfort, order, and security," a perspective that serves to play a "major role in *adapting* [original emphasis] American religion to the main currents of secular culture that have surfaced at the end of the twentieth century." Wuthnow further argues that "[s]ecularity is misunderstood if it is assumed to be a force that prevents people from being spiritual at all. It is more aptly conceived as an orientation that encourages a safe, domesticated version of the sacred."²⁵

Wuthnow's research is important and insightful. However, his discussion of the concept of the sacred he believes is emerging from small groups is not only descriptive, he also makes many evaluative comments, despite the fact that he never explicitly identifies the theological criteria that are operating in his evaluation. Wuthnow's personal theological commitments may lead him to underestimate how important such groups are in helping individuals come to a view of God that is not repressive and/or terrifying. In any case, the actual detailed descriptions of the groups that were studied provide excellent case studies for discussion as churches think about the concept of the sacred that is encouraged within their own small groups.²⁶

Wuthnow's research provides a rich store of data that warrants continuing reflection and consideration. Given the emphasis on small group ministry in large churches seeking to help members find a sense of community, and in small churches seeking to increase their numbers through the appeal of small groups, it is essential that church leaders think

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ A collection of case studies that provide detailed narratives of 14 small groups that participated in Wuthnow's research is published in Robert Wuthnow, ed., "I Come Away Stronger:" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Another insightful case study is Jody Shapiro Davie's study of a women's Bible study

seriously about what Wuthnow has learned in his research. As he points out, the changes in our understanding of the sacred that are fostered by involvement in small groups may end up costing the churches and synagogues in a significant way. There is little if any conviction that the traditions out of which our spirituality has grown are important sources of wisdom and guidance for the present. To the extent that we receive support and encouragement for believing God can be anything we want God to be, our human limitations and prejudices put us at risk of using religion to quiet a conscience that perhaps would only be of value to us if it were disturbing our peace.

Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula in Communities of Faith

Wuthnow's data have led him to conclude that both the explicit and the implicit curricula in small groups emphasize an understanding of the sacred in which God is depicted as "love, comfort, order, and security."²⁷ While one can make a strong case theologically that these are attributes of God, they are surely not the only attributes that need to be emphasized. What is perhaps most striking in terms of the null curriculum of the small groups, as portrayed by Wuthnow, is God's demand that we live just lives. Knierim argues that the universal dominion of God in justice and righteousness is the broadest and most inclusive understanding of God in the Old Testament.²⁸ Not to include the demand for justice in our thinking about God is a serious omission. One of the important issues for every local congregation to address is the extent to which it seeks to

group in a suburban Presbyterian Church, which she presents in Women in the Presence (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

²⁷ Ibid., 7.

²⁸ Knierim, Task of Old Testament Theology.

embody – and does embody – God’s demand that we live just lives.

At the end of Chapter 3, I quoted Moltmann’s claim that if the church is to be a “liberated zone” of justice and equality, it must assure that the communication in the church promotes just, egalitarian relationships. Moltmann emphasizes that one cannot simply assume that such communication exists.²⁹ In Eisner’s terms, the articulated teaching of the church in regard to the equality of all people forms the explicit curriculum of the church, a curriculum that is expressed in preaching as much as in all the other educational forms. The actual communication that takes place during worship, as well as during all the other formal and informal events in the church, constitutes the implicit curriculum – the implicit theology of the church.

One aspect of the implicit curriculum in any community is found, I have argued, in nonverbal communication. Whenever we communicate with others, the nonverbal dimension of a message creates and reflects the nature of our relationship with them. One aspect of relationship we negotiate in every communication event is control and power.³⁰ Who will speak first? Who is allowed to establish the topic that will be discussed? How long can each person involved speak? Who can tell a person s/he has spoken long enough? Who can sit where? How much personal space is each person allowed to maintain? As we negotiate these issues, our nonverbal behavior signals whether we perceive others as equal, superior, or inferior to us. We may say with our words that

²⁹ Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, 107.

³⁰ Frank E. Millar and L. Edna Rogers, “Relational Dimensions of Interpersonal Dynamics,” in Interpersonal Processes, eds. Michael E. Roloff and Gerald R. Miller (Newbury Park, Ca: Sage Publications, 1987), 117-39.

↑ Calif.

another is our equal, but if our nonverbal behavior contradicts our words, people usually believe the nonverbal.

Our nonverbal behavior follows clear patterns that vary predictably depending on several factors, including the persons with whom we are speaking, the topic, the context, and the presence of others. It is as if we were trained according to an explicit set of rules. Children learn the communication rules of their family and culture through the reprimands they receive when they violate the rules: "Look at me when I'm speaking to you!" "Don't sit like that – be a lady!" As we grow up, we imitate the nonverbal behavior we observe in others and conform our behavior to the rules that are brought into play when we make mistakes.

Although few of us can articulate the unspoken communication rules we follow in regulating our nonverbal behavior, we are aware when another person communicates nonverbally in a way that troubles us. We may not be able to describe exactly what it is that we find troubling. However, the attributions we make to others when they violate rules tend to be negative. Such attributions, Shimanoff points out, are one form of sanction.³¹ Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson have found that people who violate the unspoken rules are usually thought of as either "bad or mad."³² If someone we do not know, for example, comes and sits quite close to us in a pew when there is a great deal of space available to sit, we will almost certainly feel physically uncomfortable. We may

³¹ For a discussion of the different forms sanctions can take see Shimanoff, Communication Rules, 91-103.

³² Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson.

even feel threatened. A crowded Christmas service is a different situation, and our response to someone we do not know sitting quite close to us in a pew will likely be very different.

People from different cultures, or those who are merely new to the community, may be given a grace period in which rule violations will be overlooked without negative attributions. Over time, however, negative judgments are likely to be rendered if the newer persons do not conform to the rules of the community. These judgments may never be verbalized, but they will influence – in subtle and not so subtle ways – the interactions with people whose rules are different.

Nonverbal behaviors signal authority, although the specific behaviors associated with authority vary by culture. Among white European Americans, people in positions of authority tend, when in small groups, to look at others less than others look at them. When speaking, they tend to look at everyone in the group, whereas others will tend to address their comments to the person with authority. Persons with authority usually take up more space at the table and sit more informally. They may initiate touch, such as a congratulatory slap on the back, but those with less authority are unlikely to initiate touching them. Persons with authority have more influence than others in regard to who talks, about what topics, and for what length of time. In any community with an explicit or implicit hierarchical order of power and authority, one can gain insight into the power

dynamics of the community by simply observing the nonverbal behavior of people relative to one another.³³

One of the complicating factors in male-female communication is that the differences in nonverbal behavior between white, middle-class men and women in the United States parallel the differences between people with greater and lesser degrees of authority. Women tend to look at others when they are speaking more than men do, take up less space, sit more formally, touch men less than men touch them, and move out of a man's way when he is walking toward them in a hall or on a sidewalk. As a result of these gender differences, men often communicate as if they have more authority than women, even when the women are in positions of higher authority within the community.³⁴ Unless we become conscious of the nonverbal dynamics involved in the continual process of negotiating authority and power in a community, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to establish just, egalitarian relationships.

Another way authority and power are expressed is in the total amount of time a person speaks. Although one commonly hears that women talk more than men, research finds the opposite to be true. Linguists Deborah James and Janice Drakich reviewed 56

³³ Peter A. Anderson, "Nonverbal Behavior in the Small Group," in Small Group Communication: A Reader, 5th ed., eds, Robert S. Cathcart, and Larry A. Samovar (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1988), 333-50.

³⁴ Barbara Westbrook Eakins and R. Gene Eakins, Sex Differences in Human Communication (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 47-77.

studies of mixed-sex interactions among middle-class English-speaking Americans that were carried out between 1951 and 1991. Women talked more than men overall in only 2 of the 56 studies (3.6 percent).³⁵

Given these data, why does the stereotype of the talkative woman persist? One explanation is that women talk more to one another privately than men do. Men talk more publicly.³⁶ Another explanation points to the historical ideal of the silent woman in terms of which any amount of talk by a woman, at least in public settings, is too much.³⁷ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, reminds us that a woman who spoke out in public in seventeenth-century America could expect to be bound to a ducking stool and submerged under water. When she was brought up, gasping for air, she was offered the choice between silence and drowning. If she repented and promised to be quiet, her life would be spared. The lesson was surely not lost on other women. It was not wise to speak in ways that men thought disrupted the social order.³⁸ Jamieson reviews the history of restricting women from public speaking, restrictions that continue today in churches that forbid women to preach or bar them from holding roles of leadership.

This history helps explain why women report more difficulty in gaining a hearing for their ideas in public and having their ideas respected, and why they are less likely to

³⁵ Deborah James and Janice Drakich, "Understanding Gender Differences in Amount of Talk: A Critical Review of Research," in Gender and Conversational Interaction, ed. Deborah Tannen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 281-312.

³⁶ Deborah Tannen, You Just Don't Understand (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 78.

³⁷ Dale Spender, Man Made Language (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 42.

³⁸ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80-81

speak on controversial topics. It may also help explain why “boys speak more in class, are more likely to be called on by teachers, and are less frequently reprimanded than girls for not raising their hands to speak and being ‘impolite.’”³⁹ As we think of the implications of this research for women and men in the church, we need to pay attention to how boys and girls are encouraged to relate to one another in various contexts. If it is part of the explicit curriculum of *koinonia* in a local congregation for women and men to work together in just and egalitarian ways, it is important that women not be restricted from full participation in the church.⁴⁰

Elements of worship function as part of the implicit curriculum of *leiturgia*, influencing how women and men understand themselves in relationship to the church, one another, and God. Are all the visible church leaders during worship men? Do illustrations in sermons refer to women and men only in stereotypic social roles? Do exegetical treatments of scripture ever focus on the positive roles of women in Bible stories? Are the feminine metaphors for God in the Bible ever emphasized? Is there art in the sanctuary? If so, how are women and men depicted? What messages about men and women are found in the music? All of these issues point to aspects of the implicit curriculum of *leiturgia*, a curriculum that educates in powerful ways.⁴¹ When it is not understood, its influence in a community of faith may contradict and undermine the

³⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁰ I discuss these issues in greater detail, offering suggestions to support healthy communication between women and men in the church, in “Gender and Small Group Communication in the Church,” in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community*, eds. Jane Dempsey Douglass and James F. Kay (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 117-28.

⁴¹ Eisner, 87-97.

explicit curriculum of *leiturgia* – the articulated theology of the church.

In addition to the explicit and the implicit curricula, Eisner emphasizes the null curriculum. He claims that “what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. . . . [I]gnorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems.”⁴² The same analysis can be applied to the teaching of the church.

Eisner identifies two dimensions of the null curriculum: the intellectual processes that are emphasized and neglected and the subject matter that is present or absent.⁴³ Although Cobb does not use Eisner’s terminology, in his analysis of the current crisis in oldline denominations, he points to three significant issues that are addressed inadequately, if at all, in most communities of faith. The three issues are: the history of Christian contributions to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, which was discussed earlier in the chapter, sexism in Christian history, and failure to address the growing destruction of God’s creation.⁴⁴

In terms of the null curriculum reflected in the intellectual processes that are neglected, Cobb expresses great concern over the lack of theological thinking in the church. It is his contention that without attention to this void, there will no renewal in the church.⁴⁵ One of the contributions to the loss of theological thinking in the church comes from the larger context in which the church is embedded – the professionalization of

⁴² Ibid., 97-107.

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁴ Cobb, Reclaiming the Church, 15-21.

⁴⁵ *None*

theology as an academic discipline. The current complexity of the multiple strands of academic theology in the United States has left many pastors feeling that they cannot really understand and certainly not participate in theological discourse without doctoral level training. The study of academic theology in seminaries has left many students without any vision of what their “ministry could and should be about.” As a result, “most ministers for most purposes, [fall] back on the popular notions they brought with them to seminary, only now knowing that these could not be taken seriously as ‘theology.’”⁴⁶ Edward Farley raises similar concerns, suggesting that “what history has done to the word ‘theology’ is reduce its meaning to its objective referent (a system of doctrines and beliefs) and then narrow the location of theological activity to the specific scholarly enterprise dealing with doctrines.” Farley argues that the “ordered learning in congregations should be theological education.”⁴⁷

Cobb does not deny the value of theology as an academic discipline. His point is that churches seeking renewal need to accept their responsibility to engage in theological thinking and academic theology is unlikely to be helpful in contributing to that process. Failure to think seriously about our faith and the reasons for our beliefs, Cobb believes, contributes to the lukewarmness that permeates so many of the congregations in oldline denominations. Learning to think theologically, to think honestly and critically about the values and beliefs that are implicit, if not explicit, in our individual and corporate lives is,

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⁴⁵ Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian, 18; Reclaiming the Church, 8-31.

⁴⁶ Cobb, Reclaiming the Church, 26.

⁴⁷ Edward Farley, The Fragility of Knowledge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 88.

Cobb argues, hard and often painful work. Not only can it be hard and painful to think critically about our beliefs, such thinking is also likely to increase our awareness of the differences in our beliefs and create conflict within the congregation. This conflict may lead to further loss of membership in oldline denominations. Cobb believes, however, that if we do not “reflect seriously, as Christians, about who we are and what we are called to be, we [will] continue to drift into decadence.” The church faces a crisis in which loss of membership seems likely to continue. The question is whether the losses will occur because of decadence or faithfulness. Despite the depth of the crisis, Cobb believes “[t]here is, however, a chance that the renewed authenticity will attract new people and become the basis for a new beginning.”⁴⁸

Moving theological thought into the explicit curriculum of the church entails thinking about Christian doctrines and the reasons that warrant their acceptance. We then need to think through those reasons for ourselves by studying the Bible and relevant materials that will deepen insight into Christian faith. In addition we need to think carefully about our own beliefs in order to discern whether their real source is the Bible, Christian doctrine, or influences from our culture. The focus of such education is not to make lay persons professional theologians, but to urge all Christians to accept responsibility for their beliefs. “*All Christians already are theologians* [original emphasis]. The call to take responsibility for belief is not a call to generate beliefs out of

⁴⁸ Cobb, Reclaiming the Church, 31.

nothing. It is a call to become responsible, first of all, with regard to beliefs already in place.”⁴⁹

A congregation in which the pastoral staff and lay leaders are committed to the development of theological thinking as part of the explicit curriculum will find many contexts in which to pursue such effort. It is particularly important not to narrow our vision of education by thinking only in terms of a schooling/instructional paradigm. It is also important not to confuse the gathering of information with the more complex task of critical thinking. We cannot develop theological thinking following what Paulo Freire calls the “banking model” of education in which those who have knowledge deposit it in the minds of learners with the expectation that they will draw it out and repeat it as taught when the occasion warrants.⁵⁰ Providing lectures in adult education classes on what the church believes will not, in and of itself, contribute to the development of theological thinking.

In her analysis of the Effective Christian Education study, Christian educator Sara Little discusses what she calls the surprising findings that for adults responding to the study, “a ‘thinking’ climate contributes even more to faith maturity and denominational loyalty than does ‘warmth’.” Little, along with other contributors who analyze the results of the study, question to what extent we can actually operationalize and test the concept of faith maturity. Nevertheless, the data do suggest that adults in the church want to be challenged intellectually. Little notes that “excitement engendered in the process of

⁴⁹ Cobb, *Becoming a Thinking Christian*, 16-17.

⁵⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Myra Bergman Ramos, ~~trans.~~ (New York: Continuum, 1970), 57-74.

↑ trans.

coming to understand motivates people to probe deeply.” She goes on to point out that “75 percent of the adults placed in the mature faith category say that they believe ‘that good Christians have as many questions about faith as they have answers.’”⁵¹ She interprets this to mean that such adults would respond well to opportunities to think with others about their questions.

Little’s theory of Christian education supports the emphasis on theological thinking Cobb advocates. In To Set One’s Heart, she argues for the thesis that

[b]eliefs which engage the thinking powers of the person as they emerge out of and inform faith, sustained, reformed, and embodied by the faith community, can be an important factor in bringing integration and integrity to life. Teaching that contributes to the formation of this kind of belief necessitates the selective use of a variety of models with clear purposes, and presupposes the existence of a context that supports and interacts with intentional teaching.⁵²

Little joins Harris in affirming the importance of the explicit, implicit, and null curricula, although her work focuses primarily on religious belief within the explicit curriculum of *didache*, the ministry of teaching.

When considering *didache* in relationship to adults, it is important to use teaching methods that support adult learning and provide a context for encouraging the development of theological thinking. Adult education specialist Stephen Brookfield notes that research findings across several decades repeatedly support the importance of capitalizing on the learner’s experience in order to facilitate learning.⁵³ Cobb’s Becoming

⁵¹ Sara Little, “Rethinking Adult Education,” in Rethinking Christian Education: Explorations in Theory and Practice, ed. Davis S. Schuller (St. Louis: Chalice, 1993), 101-02.

⁵² Little, To Set One’s Heart (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 9-10.

⁵³ Stephen D. Brookfield, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), 34.

a Thinking Christian, which was written specifically to promote theological thinking in the church, conforms to the principle of capitalizing on the learner's experience.

Cobb facilitates the learning process by providing realistic vignettes to stimulate reflection on our own life experiences, beliefs, and practices. He suggests a learning process that combines personal written reflection, group discussion, and further individual written reflection focused on questions designed to help us probe our beliefs. The strength of Becoming a Thinking Christian is in the carefully presented and accessible theological content and the analysis of the different kinds of questions we need to ask in order to think through our beliefs and the reasons behind them.

Throughout his academic career, Cobb has written several books designed to make theology accessible to laity.⁵⁴ His book Praying for Jennifer introduces different theological understandings through the dialogue that takes place among a group of young people and three ministers whom they consult seeking insight into God's role in suffering and wisdom to guide their intercessory prayers for their friend Jennifer who lies in a coma following an automobile accident.⁵⁵

In addition to the explicit content of Cobb's books, they also convey an implicit curriculum, which warrants study in its own right. In books such as Praying for Jennifer and Doubting Thomas: A Christology in Story Form, Cobb teaches respect for alternative Christian understandings by including perspectives other than his own and presenting

⁵⁴ See, for example, Cobb, Is It Too Late?; Doubting Thomas; Lay Theology; Matters of Life and Death; Praying for Jennifer.

⁵⁵ Cobb, Praying for Jennifer.

them as theological positions that other faithful Christians find compelling. It is worth noting that this quality can be found in all of Cobb's writings.⁵⁶

Cobb writes carefully and respectfully about theologians with whom he disagrees. At the same time, Cobb never shies away from clearly stating his own positions and the reasons that led him to adopt them. Cobb supports his own theological convictions passionately and yet respects the fact that intelligent, faithful Christians disagree with him. People using Cobb's books to develop their competence in theological thinking would do well to study the ways in which he presents his ideas, as well as the content of the ideas he presents.

Focusing on the communication practices that will facilitate learning together in the face of inevitable differences in our theological understandings and commitments is critical. Brookfield notes that in an effective learning environment, "adults will frequently be challenged by educators and fellow learners to consider alternative ways of thinking, behaving, working, and living. But this challenging of others' ideas and attitudes and this prompting of analysis of one's own behaviors and beliefs must occur in

⁵⁶ See, for example, John B. Cobb, Jr., Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods (1962; reprint, Lanham: University Press of America, 1986). One of the theologians Cobb treats in this volume is Karl Barth, who would have rejected Cobb's own theological method without qualification. Despite the radical difference in their perspectives, Cobb presents Barth's theology with great care and respect. In laying out the presuppositions on which Barth's theology is based, Cobb notes that Barth's method commits him to reject any predisposition that might influence his reading of Scripture, thus, for example, Barth's early interest in and later radical rejection of Kierkegaard's analysis of how human beings come subjectively to the point of decision for or against faith. Cobb acknowledges that "what is truly remarkable about Barth is the extent to which he is able to let the Bible speak in terms of its own understanding of itself." Cobb notes later in the essay that although he does not believe Barth succeeded in his theological goal of "confronting us with a final choice for or against faith," he believes that Barth's effort is one of the most "brilliant" efforts of all times (196-97).

a setting where dissension or criticism of another does not imply some kind of personal denigration.”⁵⁷

Establishing and maintaining such a learning environment – especially when emotionally-charged issues that are deeply important to us are addressed – is extremely difficult. One of the concerns of this dissertation is to argue for recognition of the theological significance of such processes of communication. Before engaging in a process of developing theological thinking in a small group, for example, it would be helpful for participants to discuss ways to communicate that will facilitate a respectful, healthy, and yet constructively critical environment for learning. The communication processes of the learning environment need to be moved from the implicit curriculum to the explicit curriculum. The work of Christian educator Carol Lakey Hess makes an important contribution at this point.

Hess develops the notion of “hard dialogue and deep connections in communities of faith.” Arguing that “going deep, where we probe beneath the surface, where we question the way things are, and where it sometimes gets uncomfortable, is crucial for genuine relationality and mature caring,” she calls for an educational ministry in which an environment is created that allows women and men to speak honestly with one another while remaining connected to one another. “Honest and deep conversation,” Hess notes, “is easily thwarted in communities of faith, sometimes by harsh adversarial

⁵⁷ Brookfield, 13.

argumentation that silences some voices, other times by polite affirming discussion that keeps conversation on a surface level. Both inhibit 'real-talk' in community life."⁵⁸

In order for "real-talk" about Christian beliefs and living a Christian life that is consonant with those beliefs to occur, we need to learn how to challenge one another to think deeply and honestly while keeping in mind Paul's admonition to the community of Galatia that they should remember the commandment, "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:14-15).

The communication issues raised in this chapter and in chapter three provide insights for studying and describing the communication climate in a particular context. Beginning with such a description, we can then think about ways in which the present patterns of communication support or work against, in Hess's words, "hard dialogue and deep connections."

For a small group to develop and sustain a communication climate that will support hard dialogue and deep connections, it needs to make the dynamics of verbal and nonverbal communication part of its explicit curriculum. Group members need to talk about their own communication histories and preferences so that they can understand one another better and anticipate some of the differences in the "communication rules" they bring with them to the context. The group needs to talk about what they believe it would look like to have just, egalitarian relationships in the group, and to identify communication practices that will help and harm what they are trying to accomplish.

⁵⁸ Carol Lakey Hess, Caretakers of our Common House (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 182-83.

In addition to identifying communication practices that will help create egalitarian relationships, it is extremely helpful if people feel safe enough and committed enough to share with one another what communication patterns they are most likely to fall into when the going gets rough and develop agreements about ways of helping one another not get stuck in old destructive patterns. If we are committed to just, egalitarian relationships in a group, we must continually review the commitment and evaluate whether or not it is being energized by effective thought and action. Researchers have found that groups committed to egalitarian relationships among women and men, for example, fall back into old communication patterns that undermine that commitment.⁵⁹ When groups remind themselves periodically of their commitment, however, and review their communication, they are able to sustain healthier, more egalitarian patterns of communication.⁶⁰

Because of the importance of nonverbal behavior in communicating issues of power, authority, respect, and other dimensions of relationships, it is particularly helpful for group members to videotape themselves in a meeting or class, so that participants can see themselves as others do. If used in a constructive way, viewing their interaction can be a powerful learning experience for everyone involved.

⁵⁹ One of the ways for groups to develop more insights into communication dynamics is to read a book together and discuss how it illumines their own communication in the group. Deborah Tannen's Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men n the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power (New York: Avon, 1994) is a very interesting and helpful book that looks at differences in the ways women and men communicate at work. Many of her insights are relevant to women and men working together in congregations. For a critical discussion of Tannen's work and an alternative analysis of gender differences in communication, see my article "Gender and Small Group Communication in the Church."

⁶⁰ Susan B. Shimanoff and Mercilee M. Jenkins, "Leadership and Gender: Challenging Assumptions and Recognizing Resources," in Small Group Communication, Robert S. Cathcart, Larry A. Samovar, and Linda D. Henman, eds. (Madison: Brown and Benchmark, 1996), 327-44.

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These considerations apply to all the educational events that fall within *didache*. They are also relevant considerations for events that fall within the realms of *kerygma*, *leiturgia*, *diakonia*, *koinonia*, and *economia*.

Uncovering the Educational Realities in a Congregation

The purpose of this final section of the dissertation is to provide suggestions and questions to help leaders in local congregations begin to think about their own communities of faith in light of the issues raised in this dissertation. If members of a congregation want to evaluate the explicit, the implicit, and the null curricula that presently exist in each of the six forms of education, the first step is to pay close attention to what is happening now and describe it as clearly as possible.

It is important to think carefully about ethical ways to gather and record data accurately. People should not end up feeling as if they have been “spied” on. In order to benefit from the process, it is important to be able to document specific observations rather than to rely on general impressions. Interpretations of what is observed should be shared with those observed to see if the interpretation “rings true” for them. For the participants involved, the observed verbal and nonverbal communication in a particular situation may mean something quite different from what the observers thought.

The most constructive way to conduct an assessment of the explicit, implicit, and null curriculum in a community is to discuss openly the possibility of engaging in such a process and the reasons it might help the church to be a more faithful community. Hopefully, clergy and lay leaders in the church will work together to decide if an assessment would be helpful and plan together how to conduct it. It is important to

include people who represent different perspectives in the congregation in the planning.

If a community is divided by rival factions, each faction is likely to discount data that are offered by other factions, if they have no part in planning the process. If different factions agree to cooperate in such an assessment for the good of the church, an assessment is more likely to generate outcomes that will contribute to building up community and deepening the theological wisdom within the congregation.

With a thoughtful, detailed description of what they observe happening and *not* happening in the community of faith, members of the congregation can then begin the work of thinking together about what they believe *should* be happening. This is the move from gathering information to thinking theologically and discerning what the Spirit would have them do and be as a community seeking to be faithful to Jesus Christ.⁶¹ Both steps are critically important. We can deceive ourselves into thinking we know what the explicit, implicit, and null curricula are in our community if we do not invest the time to look and listen to what is actually occurring. Without accurate descriptive data, we are not in a position to know what we should continue doing and what we should change.

After gathering descriptive data about what is happening, move to the prescriptive dimension by asking members of the congregation what they think a Christian community *should* be like. Encourage members to work with one another to discover the sources for their beliefs. Are they biblical? Are they based on Christian doctrine? Do they emerge

⁶¹ Discernment is a very important practice for a community of faith to develop. Two helpful articles that provide specific suggestions for participating in a discernment process are Frank Rogers, Jr., "Discernment," in Practicing Our Faith, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 105-18; and Parker J. Palmer, "The Clearness Committee," in Communion, Community, Commonweal: Readings for Spiritual Leadership, ed. John S. Mogabgab (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995), 131-36.

from experiences with other congregations or from cultural narratives that are of particular significance to many members?⁶² This process is an example of the kind of theological thinking Cobb is urging. It encourages members of communities of faith to take the time to think deeply about their beliefs in regard to worship, proclaiming the gospel, teaching, ministering to others within and outside the community of faith, nurturing community, and administering the church, including the allocation of church funds.

In carrying out an assessment of a local congregation, the technical language used in the dissertation to describe the six forms of education and the three types of curricula will be confusing to many, regardless of educational level. The use of such technical language could easily become in itself an aspect of the implicit curriculum of the church because it would function to discourage those who are not comfortable with it from participating. I recommend avoiding the technical language entirely, and substituting the language used below.

Although elements of the explicit, implicit, and null curricula, and the elements of community (*koinonia*), proclamation (*leiturgia*), teaching (*didache*), service to others (*diakonia*), and administration (*economia*) have been discussed in the Christian education literature, particularly in the work of Harris, the education that occurs through the powerful and complex dynamics of verbal and nonverbal communication has not been

⁶² As discussed in Chapter 3, we have internalized parts of many cultural narratives in the process of growing up within a particular family, community, and society. We are often unaware of the powerful influence these narratives have on our perceptions of what "hangs together" and what "rings true" for us when we think about our theological understandings and commitments. See Fisher, Human Communication as Narration.

elaborated. Thinking through the explicit, implicit, and null curricula in light of the interdependent elements of communication – the persons communicating, the message, the medium through which it is communicated, and the context in which it occurs – helps to illumine the significant ways in which communication dynamics educate.

The following questions and suggestions are designed to help members of congregations uncover the explicit, implicit, and null curricula in their own communities of faith.

I. The Persons Communicating

A. Who do we intend to include (explicit curriculum)?

1. What are the stated theological beliefs in regard to members of the church? Is the priesthood of all believers affirmed?
2. What are the stated theological beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of clergy and laypersons?
3. What are the stated criteria used to determine leadership in worship, educational events, governing boards, and formal and informal committees and groups?
4. If a group is restricted in terms of who may participate, what are the stated criteria for determining who may participate?
5. What are the explicit communication rules for a particular situation regarding *who* may say *what when* and *for how long* (for example, some groups may follow Roberts Rules of Order)?

- B. What do we teach about people without realizing it (implicit curriculum)?
1. If all the visible leaders in worship are of one gender, race, socioeconomic class, nationality, what does that teach the rest of the congregation? How might the observed patterns influence the self-identity of leaders and those who are not leaders, including children and youth?
 2. If groups have a restricted or elected membership, note such issues as the ages represented, as well as the gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, educational background, and the length of time each has been a church member. What does that teach to those who are included and to those who are not?
 3. Make a list of all the small groups in the church that meet regularly. Who leads each group? How was leadership determined in each case? What is taught as a result of the range of backgrounds of those in leadership roles and the processes used to determine leadership?
 4. What theological perspectives are embodied in the leaders? What does that teach?
 5. What are the unspoken communication rules in regard to *who* may speak in specific contexts? (For example, an unspoken communication rule might be: if a *pastor* is present, then *only* the pastor should *pray*.)

6. If a group follows Roberts Rules of Order, are all persons in the group able to work with the rules easily? Do persons quite familiar with such rules control meetings to the disadvantage of persons less familiar with the rules? If they do, what does that teach?
 7. When a church communicates about itself through written materials or a web site, what categories of persons are shown to represent the church? What does that teach people both within the community and outside the community?
- C. Who do we never mention or include (null curriculum)?
1. Are there any groups of people as defined by gender, age, race, nationality, socioeconomic status, educational background, or marital status who are never asked, encouraged, or allowed to serve in leadership roles? What does that teach?
 2. Are there any groups of people who are never asked, encouraged, or allowed to be participants in groups that have some form of restriction on membership? What does that teach?

II. The Messages Communicated

- A. What do we intend to communicate through our messages (explicit curriculum)?
1. What are the stated theological beliefs of the church?
 2. Are there confessions or creeds included in corporate worship that are intended to communicate the beliefs of the congregation?

3. What does the community of faith say about itself in printed materials, on radio spots, and/or on web sites?
 4. Are there stated guidelines for the ways in which members of the community of faith strive to communicate with one another?⁶³
 5. Are processes for constructive conflict resolution learned and practiced?
- B. What do we teach through our messages without realizing it (implicit curriculum)?
1. Which of the theological beliefs of the church are emphasized most/least often in sermons? What biblical texts are preached on the most/least? What does this teach about theological beliefs and about the Bible?
 2. What do we teach through the topics that are emphasized most/least in classes?
 3. What types of people are represented in illustrations used in sermons, classes, meetings, study groups? Do positive illustrations tend to include only certain categories of people based on age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, religion? Do certain categories of people dominate negative illustrations? What does this communicate to people about themselves and others?

⁶³ Groups who make the communication process part of their explicit curriculum may find it helpful to read a book on communication together, such as one that discusses communication between women and

4. Unspoken communication rules regarding messages reveal an important aspect of the implicit curriculum.
 - a) It is helpful to state communication rules following an “if . . . , then. . . .” pattern. The “if” clause refers to the situation (if a certain person is present, if the topic is the Bible, if the person speaking is under 25, if a group is meeting in the sanctuary, and so forth). The “then” clause identifies the verbal or nonverbal behavior that is preferred, obligatory, or prohibited in that particular situation.⁶⁴
 - b) Communication rules are guiding behavior in a group when verbal and nonverbal communication patterns are predictable, and a violation of the pattern is considered inappropriate.
 - c) The rules of our own congregation will be more obvious if we visit other congregations. Noting our surprise or discomfort with ways people in other congregations communicate with one another in a particular context will shed light on the rules into which we have been socialized.

men or ways of handling conflicts constructively. See for example, Tannen, Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace; William Ury, Getting Past No, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam, 1993).

⁶⁴ The information on communication rules is based on Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research.

d) Unspoken communication rules relating to messages might include the following:

- (1) If a family comes to church with children, then children must be *absolutely quiet* (often reinforced by “dirty looks” if a child makes noise).
- (2) If a group is meeting, then it should always begin with *prayer*. The idiosyncratic unspoken rule in a group *might* be: If a group is meeting, then it should always begin with a *joke* followed by a *prayer*.

Over time communication rules will develop in a group that apply only to that group. Other rules may apply throughout a culture, for example: *If a person is speaking, then others should not interrupt*. People violate this rule regularly, but if called on the violation, the rule is acknowledged as legitimate.
- (3) If one is participating in a group at church, then one should *not ask questions about others’ beliefs*.
- (4) If a person in the group *disagrees* with another person, then s/he *should say nothing*.
- (5) If a group is meeting in the sanctuary, then they should *speak softly*.

- e) Observing a regular pattern of behavior does not provide enough information to conclude that an unspoken communication rule is guiding behavior. There must be reason to believe that a violation of the pattern is considered inappropriate by at least some of the group.
- f) What are we teaching children, youth, and adults about appropriate ways of communicating through the patterns of communication that are created and reinforced through unspoken communication rules? Are these teachings consistent with our theological understandings of the ways people should relate to one another?

C. What topics are never mentioned (explicit curriculum)?

- 1. What topics are never discussed in sermons, classes, youth group, community forums? What does this teach?
- 2. Are there parts of the Bible that are never mentioned? What does that teach about ways of understanding and relating to the Bible?

III. The Medium through which Communication Occurs

A. What do we intend to use as media of communication (explicit curriculum)?

- 1. In worship, is there an intentional use of media such as music, art, architecture, and other religious symbols to communicate the theology of the church?

2. What media are used intentionally to communicate the gospel to those outside the church? Fliers? Television or radio spots? Web sites? Newspaper or magazine stories or ads? Personal conversation? Public oral presentations? Acts of mercy? Acts of justice? (Because the body is a medium of communication, an act of mercy or justice in which no words are spoken may be a powerful message).
 3. What media are used intentionally to communicate about the local congregation to others?
 4. Is the biblical teaching of nature as a medium of God's communication with humans shared?
- B. What do we communicate through media without realizing it (implicit curriculum)?
1. If a church communicates with potential new members or current members primarily through web sites and e-mail, who is included and who is left out? What does that teach? What does an emphasis on the internet teach those within the congregation who are older and confused by the new technology? What does it teach the young if the internet is avoided? How does the experience of major technological change affect the self-identity of church members? The pastor?

2. If the medium of music is used in worship and other aspects of community life, what do the styles of music that are used and the styles that are not used teach?
3. What styles of art are used in the sanctuary and throughout the church? What does it teach, for example, if only European, classical works are used?
4. What does it communicate if there is *no* art in the church?
5. What is communicated through the medium of the human body of those who are in visible positions of worship, educational, administrative and community leadership? Notice, for example, facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, rate of speech, degree of enthusiasm in voice, volume, pitch, inflection, posture, position of body relative to others, establishment of personal space relative to others, calm or hurried manner, handling of time, and use of touch. How do messages communicated through the nonverbal medium of leaders' bodies support or contradict verbal messages? What is taught through the nonverbal messages?
6. What is communicated through the medium of clothing and personal artifacts worn by visible leaders in the church? What is taught if clothes and artifacts are used to clearly distinguish clergy from laity? Is the socioeconomic class of church leaders obvious from their clothing and jewelry? What does that teach?

7. Do identified leaders take the initiative to talk, sit, and spend time with those who are *not* influential leaders or financial contributors?
What does it teach if they do? What does it teach if they do not?
8. What is taught through the medium of space provided for different church functions and different groups who meet in the church?
9. What is communicated through use of written communication in contrast to oral communication? Do faithful volunteers ever receive more than a quick informal “thank you” for their efforts?
What does that teach?
10. What is communicated through the medium of nature as found in the environment of the church?
11. What are the unspoken communication rules regarding the media that are appropriate to use in the context of or on behalf of the church?

C. What media are never used or mentioned (null curriculum)?

1. What media are never used to communicate the gospel in worship?
Internet, movies, television, radio, newspapers, books, art, music, architecture, nature?
2. What media are never used to help build community, teach, administer the business of the church, minister to others?

IV. The Context in which Communication Occurs

- A. What do we intend to teach *through* and *about* the contexts within and outside the community of faith (explicit curriculum)?
1. Are there specific rules regarding events that may or must not take place in certain contexts such as the sanctuary, the pastor's office, a classroom, or outside?
 2. How does a congregation intend to relate to the neighborhood context in which it exists?
 3. How does a congregation intend to relate to the larger context of the world?
 4. Are there specific processes in place to help church members stay abreast of changing realities in their local and world context?
 5. Is the theological significance of paying attention to what is happening to the earth and to people outside the church taught?
 6. What intentional efforts are made to create positive, appropriate physical contexts for worship, youth group, Bible study, prayer groups, classes, community-wide events, pastoral counseling, serving the larger community, committee meetings, and so forth?
- B. What is taught without realizing it *through* and *about* the contexts within and outside the congregation (implicit curriculum)?

1. Does the pastor take into account the context of the local congregation in preaching?⁶⁵ What does it teach if this is done? If it is not done?
2. Are the concerns and issues dominating people's attention in the context of the world dealt with in sermons, prayers, music, art, classes, prayer groups, Bible study, outreach? What is taught if they are? If they are not?
3. Are the many forms of context that influence communication taken into account? Context has many dimensions. The relevant aspect(s) of context in a given situation might be: a type of service – funeral, wedding, Christmas eve – a family's home burning down, the economic, political situation in a local community, a major world event, the presence of new church members, the context of a small private office, an elaborately or sparsely decorated meeting room, racial tensions in a community, or financial problems within the local church. The *meaning* of what persons say and do in a given situation will be greatly influenced by the aspects of context that are particularly salient to the people involved. Multiple contexts may be relevant simultaneously in a

⁶⁵ For insights into ways of understanding a local congregation and incorporating insights from the local congregation into sermons, see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

particular situation. What is taught by taking relevant contextual issues into account? What is taught when such issues are ignored?

- C. What aspects of context are never recognized, taken into account, or discussed (null curriculum)?
1. Given the forms of context discussed above, are there dimensions of context that are overlooked? What is taught by failure to recognize or acknowledge particular dimensions of context?
 2. Are there contexts in which the church is embedded that are never mentioned? What is taught as a result?

Conclusion

Studying a community of faith in light of the questions and suggestions given above will help people within a local congregation – and researchers in practical theology – gain increased insight into how people are being educated – intentionally and unintentionally – within a particular community of faith. It is important to keep in mind the multiple forms through which a community of faith educates those who come within its sphere of influence – *didache*, *kerygma*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *economia* – each of which occurs through a dynamic process of verbal and nonverbal communication. The complex realities of the communication process – and the significant part it plays in constituting the explicit, implicit, and null curricula – have not been elaborated in sufficient depth within the disciplines of Christian education or homiletics. This dissertation was written to help address that need. There is far more that could and should be said about the dynamics of human communication within

communities of faith. It is my hope that this dissertation will encourage practical theologians within local congregations and within the academy to focus more attention, discussion, and research on the intricate ways in which communication, theology, education, and self-identity are inevitably intertwined.

Emphasizing the theological importance of communication returns me to the three-fold thesis of this dissertation (1) that the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming our lives, faith communities, and world is supported or diminished by our human responses, (2) that a person's response to the Spirit is strongly influenced by the person's self-identity, which is a continually emerging reality, a life-long process that occurs within an ongoing, and only partially controllable, flow of verbal and nonverbal, intentional and unintentional, communication events, and (3) that from the perspective of a theology that affirms the immanence of the Spirit of God, critical reflection on self-identity, the conflicting forces of late modernity, and the dynamics of human communication points to the need for an integrated, multifaceted approach to Christian education that takes into account the theological significance of the informal and unintentional processes of education that occur within a community of faith as well as the forms of intentional education.

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
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